

Near-Synonymous Phrases in the Extended Unit of Meaning Framework: A Case Study on “insist on” and “stick to” and Its Pedagogical Implications

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Abstract

Based on the theoretical framework of the extended unit of meaning, this paper mainly compares the similarities and differences between the two sets of near-synonymous verb phrases “insist on” and “stick to” in terms of register frequency distribution, semantic collocation, and semantic prosody characteristics in the native English corpus COCA and the Chinese learners’ writing corpus iWriteBaby, and analyzes the factors affecting learners’ acquisition. The study shows that native speakers distinguish between “insist on” and “stick to” in use, but Chinese learners confuse them due to the influence of mother tongue transfer and learning environment, resulting in significant differences in semantic characteristics compared with native English. The results of this study have certain implications for second language vocabulary teaching.

Keywords

Extended Unit of Meaning; Corpus; Near-synonyms; Collocation; Semantic Prosody

1. Introduction

Near-synonyms refer to words that are almost synonyms but not entirely synonymous, and they cannot be completely replaced by each other. Lyons (1995) and Tylor (1995) both believe that near-synonyms have similar but distinct meanings. Differences can be reflected in connotative and denotative meanings, the meaning components they emphasize, or grammatical usage and collocation. When multiple near-synonyms are available, the choice should be made based on certain definite tendencies (Inkpen & Hirst, 2006).

Based on his understanding of collocation research, Sinclair believes that collocation as a whole has its own meaning. Therefore, he proposed the model of extended unit of meaning, which includes five elements: node word, collocation, colligation, semantic preference, and semantic prosody, forming a working method for the unit of

meaning. Among them, collocation reveals the co-selection of words; colligation reveals the co-selection of words and grammar; semantic preference reveals the co-selection of words and semantics; semantic prosody reveals the co-selection of words and functions. This model lays the research path for the unit of meaning, combines the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations of language, identifies the unit of meaning as a multi-word unit generated by co-selection, and semantic prosody determines the boundary of the unit of meaning (Gao & Wei, 2020).

Lu (2010) argues that English learners' insufficient mastery of collocational behavior and semantic prosody knowledge of near-synonyms is not conducive to distinguishing near-synonyms. Many scholars have also conducted comparative or summary studies on the vocabulary use of learners and native speakers from the perspective of the extended unit of meaning model. Han (2018) found that compared with international journal authors, English learners have significant differences in the use of semantic prosody at the meaning level, which affects the expression of learners' academic attitudes and the credibility of academic viewpoints. Zhong (2019, 2022a, 2022b) studied the differences in the extended unit of meaning model between Chinese learners and native English speakers in the use of nouns and verbs, and used examples to guide second language learners. Luo & Chen (2023) summarized the extended semantic units, semantic preferences of collocations, and the embodiment of semantic characteristics in context for the specific word "keep" in the native corpus. In addition to focusing on vocabulary research, some studies have explored phrases. Han and Lu (2020) compared the usage rules of the synonymous phrases "deal with" and "cope with" between native English speakers and Chinese English learners, clarified the differences, and analyzed the reasons.

Verbs have a permanent place in almost all languages because they are often the core of a sentence. The discrimination of near-synonymous verbs is a difficulty for Chinese students in learning English and cannot be ignored. However, due to the limitations of limited class hours, insufficient teachers, and lack of resources, college English courses generally do not have special vocabulary courses. Vocabulary is the basic component of foreign language learning and communication. However, current college English teaching has many problems in vocabulary training (Ding, 2020). English verbs are often combined with function words, and the similar grammatical usage and meanings of phrasal verbs make discrimination more difficult. In the teaching process, confusion and misuse often occur because the Chinese meanings of two phrases are the same or similar. Therefore, it is of great significance to study and distinguish the collocational characteristics of near-synonymous verb phrases in native and non-native corpora, and it also has practical value for teaching guidance.

2. Research Design

2.1. Research Objectives

This paper selects a set of near-synonymous verb phrases for research. Both “insist on” and “stick to” are translated to “jian chi” in Chinese and are key English phrasal verbs that Chinese students need to focus on learning. This study attempts to use corpora to explore and answer the following questions:

- (1) For native English speakers, what are the characteristics of “insist on” and “stick to” in terms of frequency distribution, collocation, and semantic prosody?
- (2) Are there similarities or differences between Chinese English learners and native speakers in the collocation of these two sets of near-synonymous phrases and the semantic prosody of collocates?
- (3) What are the main factors affecting Chinese English learners’ correct acquisition of near-synonymous verb phrases? What are the implications for teaching?

2.2. Research Tools

The data of Chinese students come from the iWriteBaby Chinese Learner English Corpus, which is derived from English compositions generated by the iWrite English Writing Evaluation Engine. It contains 52,855 learners’ English compositions, with a total of 8,299,066 word tokens. The compositions in the corpus are from 69 colleges and universities in 48 cities in 23 provinces, autonomous regions of China. These students belong to 154 different disciplines, and there are more than 1,000 essay topics in the corpus (Xu, 2019). Compared with previous corpora, the corpus has a wider source and a larger number of texts, which can more accurately reflect the real situation of students’ compositions and fully reflect the language acquisition of Chinese English learners. The reference native corpus is the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), which is a representative and widely used large-scale English corpus in the United States, with a capacity of over 1 billion words. It has rich text types and up-to-date content, which can effectively reflect the language characteristics of native English speakers and provide abundant data for this study. In addition, the study on learners’ acquisition will be based on the CQPweb corpus platform built by Beijing Foreign Studies University for corpus analysis and statistics.

2.3. Research Methods

To find out the differences in the use of the near-synonymous phrases “insist on” and “stick to” between Chinese English learners and native speakers, especially in terms of register frequency distribution, semantic collocation, and semantic prosody characteristics, the study is carried out in the following steps:

First, compare and analyze the frequency distribution differences of this set of near-synonymous phrases in different registers of the COCA, and analyze their distribution characteristics in different registers (such as spoken language, fiction, news, academia, etc.) to reveal the usage frequency and distribution rules of these two phrases in different contexts.

Second, retrieve the collocates of these phrases in the two corpora respectively to compare and analyze the similarities and differences in collocation between the two node phrases. In the COCA, under the “collocates” function, take “stick to” and “insist on” as node phrases, set the part of speech (_pos) of the phrases as verbs, extract within a span of ± 4 , set the frequency threshold as ≥ 3 , use Mutual Information (MI) to measure the significant collocation degree between collocates and node words, set $MI \geq 3$ here, sort by frequency in descending order, then qualitatively classify the collocates in the valid index lines, and exclude parts that do not meet the meaning requirements according to the context.

Then, compare and analyze the similarities and differences in semantic prosody between the two phrases in the COCA to reveal the differences in the emotions or attitudes they convey in use. In the analysis process, if there are index lines that cannot clearly reflect their semantic prosody characteristics, it is necessary to obtain contextual information.

Finally, after performing the same steps in the relevant options of iWriteBaby, obtain the learners' usage, and conduct a comprehensive comparative analysis with the collocation similarities and differences and semantic characteristics of native speakers.

3. Results and Analysis

3.1. Usage of “insist on” and “stick to” in COCA

To delve into the differences between “insist on” and “stick to” in actual language use, this section will conduct a detailed analysis from multiple dimensions based on data from the COCA. Firstly, it will examine the frequency distribution of the two phrases across different registers to reveal their tendencies in usage scenarios. Then, through a comparison of their collocations and colligational patterns, it will clarify their preferences in lexical combinations. Finally, it will conduct an in-depth analysis of their semantic prosodies and semantic orientations, aiming to comprehensively present the usage patterns of these two near-synonymous phrases, thereby providing empirical evidence for subsequent comparative studies and pedagogical implications.

3.1.1. Analysis of Register Frequency Distribution

Halliday (1978) believes that a register is a meaning structure usually associated with a situation type. It can be seen that the differences between different registers are not only reflected in form but also in meaning. The former (form) is determined by the latter (meaning). Therefore, the basic differences between the two sets of near-synonymous phrases can be seen from their general register distribution. Input “insist on” and “stick to” as index words in the COCA for register distribution analysis, and the results are as Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1. Distribution of “insist on” across registers in COCA

Category	Frequency	Proportion
Fiction	2510	17.13%
Academic Articles	2453	16.74%
Magazines	1984	13.54%
Blogs	1927	13.15%
Websites	1925	13.13%
News	1746	11.91%
Spoken Language	1118	7.63%
TV/Movies	993	6.78%
Total	14656	100%

Table 2. Distribution of “stick to” across registers in COCA

Category	Frequency	Proportion
Magazines	2387	18.78%
Blogs	2368	18.63%
Websites	1869	14.70%
TV/Movies	1786	14.05%
Spoken Language	1317	10.36%
News	1289	10.14%
Fiction	1261	9.92%
Academic Articles	435	3.42%
Total	12712	100%

The statistical results in Table 1 show that “insist on” has the highest proportion in fiction and academic articles among the eight genres, accounting for 17.13% and 16.74% respectively, indicating that this phrase is commonly used in written style. In addition, the usage of “insist on” in movies, TV, and spoken language is relatively low, which further indicates that this phrase is more formal.

The statistical results of the register distribution of “stick to” in Table 2 are just the opposite of “insist on”. “stick to” has the highest proportion in magazines and blogs, 18.78% and 18.63% respectively, indicating that this phrase is used in more casual occasions. Similarly, the frequency of “stick to” in academic articles is the lowest, only 3.42%.

Therefore, “insist on” is more suitable for use in objective written styles, while “stick to” tends to be used in spoken language. This also provides a reference for English learners to use these two phrases in different stylistic writings.

3.1.2. Comparative Analysis of Collocation and Colligation

Wittgenstein believes that “the meaning of a word lies in its use”, and the “use” here refers to collocation. Later, Firth expressed a similar view, “A word is characterized by the company it keeps” (Kintsch & Mangalath, 2011). Then we can reveal the meaning of a word by studying its horizontal collocations. Search “insist on” and “stick to” in the COCA respectively, set the span as ± 4 , MI ≥ 3 , sort

by collocation frequency in descending order, and list the top 15 significant collocates. The search results of the two verb phrases are shown in Table 3. and Table 4.

Table 3. Top 15 Collocates of “insist on” in COCA

Number	Collocate	Frequency	MI Value
1	if	338	3.01
2	why	261	4.34
3	using	91	4.46
4	calling	65	5.63
5	making	60	3.66
6	seeing	49	4.91
7	getting	46	3.19
8	taking	43	3.65
9	keeping	33	4.98
10	paying	31	5.06
11	staying	27	5.76
12	playing	27	3.71
13	knowing	23	4.59
14	bringing	22	4.87
15	putting	21	4.15

Table 4. Top 15 Collocates of “stick to” in COCA

Number	Collocate	Frequency	MI Value
1	plan	389	4.78
2	guns	225	6.28
3	facts	168	5.44
4	schedule	107	5.39
5	budget	96	4.05
6	script	93	6.03
7	principles	73	4.8
8	diet	70	4.81
9	original	60	3.15
10	routine	57	4.98
11	rules	57	3.05
12	basics	53	6.63
13	bottom	51	3.14
14	topic	39	3.91
15	tend	38	3.36

It can be seen from Table 3 and Table 4 that the collocates of the two near-synonymous phrases “insist on” and “stick to” are generally nominal and often located on the right, forming a verb-object form. The main reason is that they are combinations ending with prepositions “on” and “to” respectively. The gerund forms are mostly due to grammatical limitations. To explain the research results, gerunds are positioned as action verbs in practice.

In Table 3, “insist on” has the most gerund collocates, accounting for 13 of the 15 items, such as using, calling, making, as well as the conjunction “if” and the interrogative adverb “why”. Through specific analysis, among the gerund collocates, using,

calling, seeing, paying, playing, putting and other words are non-continuous verbs, emphasizing immediate actions; getting, taking, keeping, staying, knowing and other words are continuous verbs, emphasizing continuous states. It can be seen that “insist on” tends to co-occur with words representing specific actions. That is to say, these words have a certain “agentive” meaning, either immediate or continuous actions.

In Table 4, “stick to” has more common noun collocates, with 12 items, such as plans, guns, facts, schedule, etc.; the verb collocate “tend”; the adjective collocates “original” and “bottom”. Among them, collocates such as plans, schedule, budget, diet, routine, tend are related to “plans, planning”; words such as facts, script, principles, rules, basics, original, bottom are related to “original, plan”. Although the basic meaning of the high-frequency collocate “guns” of “stick to” is different from the meaning category expressed by other nominal words, the collocational meaning of other words also provides some ideas for our understanding of the meaning of “stick to... guns”, that is, it is probably a colloquial expression with a meaning similar to other collocations.

3.1.3. Comparative Analysis of Semantic Preference and Semantic Prosody

Semantic preference and semantic prosody are two important factors for the extension of lexical meaning. An obvious difference between semantic prosody and semantic preference is that “semantic preference may be towards any definable semantic field, but semantic prosody is always either positive or negative evaluation” (McEnery & Hardie, 2011).

Semantic preference refers to the semantic characteristics presented by the collocates of the node word. The research object is the collocates, reflecting the collocational habits between the core meaning and surrounding words. Semantic prosody reflects the semantic characteristics of the core meaning itself, used to express the attitude of communication, emphasizing the attitude presented by the node word in collocation. According to the different semantic preferences of collocates, the semantic prosody embodied by the node word is also different, and the semantic prosody is not the same in different colligations (Luo & Chen, 2023).

Among the collocates of “insist on” in Table 3, the most frequent ones are the conjunction “if” and the interrogative adverb “why”, both of which express an attitude of uncertainty or incomprehension towards specific things. Other collocates are mostly neutral semantic action verbs, usually located on the right of the modified word. By examining the extended context of the index lines where these collocates are located, we find that even seemingly neutral words such as having, calling, seeing are “infected” with a negative semantic atmosphere. The following are some index lines:

(1) Forgive me truly if I *insist on* having someone with your brains and a fresh pair of eyes.

(2) Why do you insist on calling me that? You know my name is Carl.

(3) Why insist on seeing a bad movie?

(4) We don't understand why they *insist on* keeping the recorded voice for all the incoming callers to hear.

This further indicates that the collocates of “insist on” present a context with subjective emotional color, so “insist on” conveys a semantic characteristic of a relatively tough attitude.

The nouns in the collocates of “stick to” in Table 4 all reflect neutral semantics and objectivity. The collocation of words such as “plan, principle” indicates that “stick to” expresses loyalty or consistency, emphasizing the adherence to previously formulated plans or decisions, and a position or attitude that is not easily changed. By examining the extended context of the index lines where these collocates are located, it is found that the overall semantic prosody is positive. The following are some retrieval lines:

(5) Make a plan and *stick to* it.

(6) We do about 400 a year now - *stick to* facts, not to opinions, feelings or general directions.

(7) Plan your day and *stick to* the schedule - you'll feel less overwhelmed.

(8) It is a good call to *stick to* your principles and not pay the hacker.

Through the study on the use of “insist on” and “stick to” by native speakers, it is found that in different contexts, the frequency distribution of “insist on” and “stick to” is different. Specifically, “insist on” is more suitable for objective written styles, while “stick to” is more common in spoken expression. Further study on their collocations finds that “insist on” often co-occurs with words representing specific actions, with obvious immediate or continuous “agentive” meaning; in contrast, the collocates of “stick to” are more abstract, presenting a certain meaning of “principles, plans”. At the level of semantic preference and semantic prosody, the words collocated with “insist on” present negative or neutral semantics, and “insist on” conveys a relatively tough attitude; while the collocates co-occurring with “stick to” express positive semantic prosody, expressing loyalty or consistency, and “stick to” itself emphasizes adherence to previous plans or decisions, showing a position or attitude that is not easily changed.

3.2. Usage of “insist on” and “stick to” in iWriteBaby

Search “insist on” and “stick to” in the iWriteBaby corpus respectively, set the span as ± 4 , $MI \geq 3$, sort by frequency in descending order, remove duplicates, and list the top 15 and 13 significant collocates that meet the retrieval conditions. The search results of the two verb phrases are shown in Tables 5 and 6.

First, in terms of frequency, learners used “insist on” 397 times in 312 composition texts in the corpus, and “stick to” 382 times in 354 composition texts. Comparatively, “stick to” is used more frequently. However, according to the previous study on the

native corpus, “stick to” often appears in spoken style, which deviates from the usage of native speakers.

Second, in terms of colligation, there are also co-occurrences with gerunds in the collocation of “insist on”, but relatively few in “stick to”, which seems to conform to the collocational habits of native speakers. However, the study finds that base form of verbs also appear in the colligation of the latter. The analysis shows that this is mainly due to learners’ insufficient acquisition of the phrase “stick to”, because under the influence of negative transfer of infinitive acquisition, learners mistake the preposition “to” in the phrase for the infinitive marker, thus collocating with base verbs. The retrieval lines are as follows:

(9) I am so admire that you could *stick to* get up early whenever is cold or hot to read the English essay what is a difficult thing to me.

(10) However, in the beginning, I didn’t make an obvious progress, I never forget what the teacher said and *stick to* built the confidence.

Finally, in terms of semantic preference and semantic prosody, some words appear repeatedly in the two sets of collocations, such as self, principles, customs, goal (s), dream (s), etc., which form common Chinese phrases with “insist on” / “stick to” + “dream” / “self”. The retrieval lines are as follows:

a. + “dream”:

(11) As we all know, you not only study hard every day, but also have always *insisted on* your *dream*.

(12) Without a strong will, we may not *stick to* our *dream*, our goal.

b. + “oneself”:

(13) In my opinion, we should not only *insist on self*, but also to adapt to the society.

(14) Last but not last, I also feel that it is very good to *stick to yourself*.

It can be seen that Chinese learners do not make pragmatic distinctions between the usage of “insist on” and “stick to”. This may be because in Chinese, the semantic characteristic of the word “jian chi” often expresses a continuous and unchanging attitude towards something, and its use to express a strong and emphasized semantic tendency is relatively rare. Therefore, Chinese learners are also affected by negative transfer of their mother tongue when actually using the two phrases.

4. Conclusion and Implications

Based on the framework theory of extended unit of meaning, this study adopts corpus research methods, with data from COCA and iWriteBaby corpora, to conduct a comparative study on the near-synonyms “insist on” and “stick to”. By retrieving this set of near-synonymous phrases and analyzing their register distribution, collocates, and semantic prosody, the following conclusions are drawn: 1) Among native English speakers, “insist on” is suitable for written styles such as academic reports and novels, while “stick to” is more colloquial, such as in spoken language and blogs. “Insist on” collocates most with verbs (nouns), and the collocates often have

negative semantic prosody, with the core meaning expressing a strong attitude. “stick to” collocates most with nouns, and the collocates present neutral or positive semantic prosody, with the core meaning emphasizing consistency and continuity. 2) Chinese learners have poor acquisition effects of the two near-synonymous verb phrases “insist on” and “stick to”, including low discrimination between them in terms of stylistic usage tendency, colligation, and semantic characteristics, which deviates from the usage of native speakers. 3) Chinese learners only memorize the meanings of “insist on” and “stick to” in isolation, and generally translate them into the Chinese meaning of “jian chi” for use, without mastering the different pragmatic functions of the two sets of near-synonymous phrases according to different colligations in the entire extended unit of meaning. The reasons, in addition to the negative transfer of the mother tongue, are also closely related to the lack of authenticity of language learning materials faced by Chinese students, vocabulary teaching being divorced from specific contexts, and English learning ignoring in-depth processing of vocabulary (Chen & Ma, 2012).

The results of this study provide useful enlightenment for English teaching in China: First, in vocabulary teaching, we should pay special attention to the differences in semantic prosody between near-synonyms. It should be clear that although near-synonyms are similar in referential meaning, there are significant differences in actual collocational behavior and semantic prosody. Therefore, they cannot be arbitrarily interchanged at any time. Second, this study provides a relatively new teaching method for vocabulary teaching, especially near-synonym teaching. This method helps to get rid of the traditional isolated teaching mode and brings new perspectives and thoughts to vocabulary teaching. In addition, the application of corpora in English vocabulary teaching is an aspect of the informatization development of English teaching, which can deepen the digital application of English vocabulary teaching and build an open teaching environment based on computer network technology (Ji, 2019). Therefore, teachers should also actively introduce corpus-driven learning methods to students, help them deeply observe the extended context of vocabulary through a large number of authentic language input materials, promote their perception and application of vocabulary collocations in line with native speaker habits, and at the same time promote the modernization and innovative development of English education.

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