

Collocational Trends of De-lexicalised English Verbs (have, make, take) and Their Spanish Homologues: A Preliminary Contrastive Study

Silvia Molina Plaza¹ & Carmen Sancho Guinda²

Universidad Politécnica de Madrid

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present on-going research (BFF 2003-02540 with the acronym DUFIE *Diccionario de unidades fraseológicas inglés/español*) of contrastive phraseology in English and Spanish, exposing in the introduction the main tenets of idioms and collocations from a contrastive perspective and analysing the most salient collocational structures in the subsequent sections, with a focus on the commonest types of verb + noun combinations, and especially on delexicalised verbs, of little lexical import. The corpora used all throughout are the BNC (British National Corpus) and CREA (*Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual*), both over a 100 million words, linguistically representative and of easy access. Results show that quantitative and qualitative comparison of collocations are much needed to highlight the similarities and even more the lexical and typological differences among the two languages for a more fruitful use by ESL (English as a Second Language) and ELE (*Español como Lengua Extranjera*) learners. Always with a view to facilitating lexical and cultural acquisition in the L2, all these findings are to be reflected in a translation-oriented *Diccionario de Unidades fraseológicas inglés-español* (DUFIE) dictionary of collocations and idioms for advanced learners of English.

Keywords: collocations, delexicalised verbs, translation, L2 acquisition 1. Types of VERB + NOUN PHRASE combinations in the BNC and CREA and internet texts

Right from the outset it should be emphasized that idioms are not as common in written language as one might think. They are relatively colloquial and rarely employed in fiction and other registers such as academic books³. However, they are sparingly used as a title for Internet articles since they neatly encapsulate the main point of an argument or text (i.e. '**Take the Bull by the Horns:** If you like the idea of taking a bite out of your department's teaching load, as suggested in last month's column, be aware that designing and running your own undergraduate practical classes are nothing like being a demonstrator in one of your boss's classes). Some colloquial idioms are used in news reportage adding colour and vivacity to otherwise serious discussion: *This is not a desperation move, he insists, but is a pre-emptive strike against Microsoft: 'We are taking the bull by the horns' (NEWS).*

¹ School of Naval Engineering, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, silvia.molina@upm.es

² School of Aeronautical Engineering, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, carmen.sguinda@upm.es

³ Note, however, that a few of these expressions are used in academic prose or other kinds of expository writing: *bear in mind, take into account* (Biber et al. 1999: 1026).

However, the most common types of verb + noun phrase we have found in both corpora from a syntactic and semantic point of view are the following:

- 1) The leading verb is followed by a direct object and further optional modifiers. To build castles in the air (make unrealistic plans) > *hacer castillos en el aire*, to blow off steam (to rid oneself of one's indignation) > *desahogarse*, put on airs (to assume fancy manners) > *darse aires de importancia*, to call a spade a spade (to call a thing by its right name) > *llamar al pan, pan y al vino, vino*.
- 2) Idioms which function like intransitive verbs: carry coals to Newcastle > *ir a vendimiar y llevar uvas de postre*; have an axe to grind > *tener un interés personal/ ni me va ni me viene*; burn the candle at both ends > *tratar de abarcar demasiado, hacer de la noche día*.
- 3) Idioms which function like transitive verbs: give X the cold shoulder > *hacerle el vacío a alguien*; pull X's leg > *tomar a alguien el pelo*; have a stab at > *apuñalar a*. Some expressions passivize freely in English and Spanish: bear something in mind > *tener en cuenta*, nip something in the bud > *cortar algo de raíz*, settle a score > *anotarse un tanto*. (Nunberg et al. 1994: 532ff.).
- 4) Idioms which function like a tenseless clause: It rains cats and dogs > *llover a cántaros*.
- 5) 'Cranberry collocations' (Makkai 1972: 43), those containing lexical items unique to the combination: put the **kibosh** on > *dar al traste con algo*.
- 6) Metaphorical expressions: blow the gaff > *descubrir el pastel; levantar la liebre*. Few metaphorical expressions are actually opaque; in other words, true idioms.
- 7) Expressions with synonymous variants: different lexicalisations, where the substituting lexemes are not necessarily synonymous, although the variant expressions are: *burn your boats* > *burn your bridges*; *take the biscuit* > *take the cake*; *sweeten the pill* > *sugar the pill*.
- 8) Idioms quite flexible syntactically (Gibbs, Nayak and Cutting, 1989) whose degree of syntactic flexibility is strongly related to the level of analysability of an idiom: the more analysable they are, the more syntactic flexibility they exhibit.
- 9) Variant lexicalisations, it should be noted, are related to British or American English: *blow your own trumpet* (BrE) > *blow your own horn* (AmE).
- 10) Verb phrase + noun with zero determiner: *save/lose face; make head nor tail of a story; take/lose heart*. Interestingly, some authors, like Moon (1998:93), classify these as 'predicate fixed expressions'.
- 11) Constructions with a semantically empty/'light' verb such as *have, make* or *take* (*have a drink*) and a singular indefinite NP denoting actions that can also be referred to by verbs that are homophonous with the nouns in the VPs: (*drink*). These expressions form a cline of idiomaticity from clearly idiomatic expressions (*take time, have a look*) to relatively idiomatic expressions such as *have a chance, take a walk, make a statement* where the meaning of individual words is retained up to a certain extent and having at the other extreme expressions that retain the core meaning of these verbs (Biber 1999: 1027): *you can **take** a snack in your pocket, he **made** a sandwich*.

It should also be borne in mind that the verbs with the highest collocability span with nouns do not always show a high frequency of use. Despite the fact that the Spanish verbs *tener, hacer* (to have, to make) are used very often and show a high collocability rate, there are also many common verbs such as *poder, querer, creer* (can, want, believe) whose collocability is null, and others, for example *echar, sacar* and *levantar* (to throw, to get out, to lift) collocate profusely with substantives but, according to Ueda (1990), their frequency is relatively low.

Írsula (1994: 284-285) presents a taxonomy of verb + noun collocations in Spanish, highlights the polysemy of verbs like *tener*, *hacer*, etc. and notices that their collocability is higher if compared with that of more specific verbs (*dar un puñetazo* vs. *asestar un puñetazo* [to give somebody a punch]). We have found that the same principle applies in English.

The two languages share the eleven features enumerated so far but differ in some aspects, for example, the Spanish verb performs a copulative function and gives information about tense, number, mood and always like an auxiliary to the real predication, the noun phrase (NP). Verbs can be eliminated in Spanish, whereas this is not feasible in English: in Spanish we say 'Permítame (*hacer*) una aclaración' [let me make an explanation] omitting the verb, but in English we definitely need it. Another disparity lies in the selection of the verbs by the substantive. Both English and Spanish share an identical functional verbal lexeme on many occasions ('have no doubt/*no tener dudas*') but in countless other instances it is dissimilar in the two languages or even within different genres and regional varieties in the same language. Allerton (1984:33) and Alonso Ramos (1993: 579 and ff.) point out that these selections are often arbitrary and unpredictable, and for that reason, the ELT teacher should obviously zero in on the verb divergences among languages (i.e. **take** a walk/*dar un paseo*) so as to avoid unwanted lexical interferences from the mother tongue and its wrong literal translations.

The fact that the BCN corpus can only be subdivided in oral and written texts makes a quantitative comparison difficult and very time-consuming among genres unless one counts them manually. Despite this proviso, we think it is interesting to highlight the similarities and differences of one of the biggest groups of verb + noun functional collocations in the two languages. As Luque and Manjón (1998:20-21) remark, students start learning simple collocations with these verbs *hacer*, *tomar*, *tener*, etc. [make, take, have] and then go on to acquire more functionally specific and difficult ones. That is, they learn first *hacer una pregunta* (neutral style) and later *formular una pregunta* (formal register), both meaning 'ask a question'. We assume this principle is also applicable to ESL learners when they learn collocations from a B1 level onwards.

1. Objectives and corpus findings in the BNC and CREA

Our data for analysis in this paper will be idiomatic phrases and collocations in English and their Spanish counterparts with the verbs *have*, *make* and *take* and their Spanish translation: *tener*, *hacer*, *tomar* after Biber (1999: 1027). We have chosen as well noun collocates with a high frequency in both languages. Our references in Spanish are Ueda (1989), who selected the most common nominal collocates (2,727), and the Dictionary *Diccionario de Uso del Español (Dictionary of Spanish Usage)* by María Moliner, as it indicates the verb collocates that usually go with these delexicalised base. In English the number of tokens comprises occurrences in all the BNC subcorpora (90% from written texts) and most of our examples belong to the journalistic ('news') genre. The Spanish figures reflect the total count in all CREA subcorpora and the partial count in the news genre—separated by a slash (/). Results only reflect the base + collocate, excluding tense, number and lexical variation.

ENGLISH

a) Selected noun phrases combining with *have* in news. Notice that most nouns are abstract in comparison with common collocations in the oral register such as: 'have a meeting, have a baby, and have a cup of coffee':

<i>MULTI-WORD UNIT</i>	<i>NUMBER OF TOKENS</i>	<i>EXAMPLE</i>
Have access	631	The international chains have access to systems like Sabre and Galileo, (NEWS...)
Have the opportunity	424	East Germany's leaders will have the opportunity of discussing the future of the two Germanies over the next two days (NEWS)
Have problems	295	these results indicate that only a small percentage have problems. (ACAD)
Have an/the advantage	65+171=236	Candidates using them for project or course work may have an advantage if spelling is one of the skills being tested (NEWS)
Have the effect	218	These regular outbursts have inevitably had an effect beyond that intended (NEWS)

b) Selected noun phrases combining with *make*:

<i>MULTI-WORD UNIT</i>	<i>NUMBER OF TOKENS</i>	<i>EXAMPLE</i>
Make use (of)*	683	D.R. Walker's stark caricature of the Prime Minister exemplifies those pieces that make use of line rather than grain (NEWS)
Make progress	121	Sterling fails to make progress (NEWS)
Make amends	109	He can only approach him as a vassal might approach a g overlord, a rebellious vassal at that, who now repents treachery and wishes to make amends (NEWS)
Make judgements	48	How can we get the message across that counsellors do not make judgements , ? (NEWS)
Make assumptions	41	In some cases, purchasers of leasehold properties have made assumptions about the level of service charges they would be required to pay (ACAD)

c) Selected noun phrases combining with *take*. There are a large number of **take + noun** collocations of which we include a selection of the most common ones in written texts below.

These may be contrasted with the most frequent collocations in the oral register: *take a walk a bus/a train; take a minute/a while/ten minutes; take exercise; take an interest in:*

COLLOCATIONAL TRENDS OF DE-LEXICALISED ENGLISH VERBS

<i>MULTI-WORD UNIT</i>	<i>NUMBER OF TOKENS</i>	<i>EXAMPLE</i>
Take advantage (of)*	1610	A pension loan takes advantage of the cash lump sum your pension plan will provide at retirement (ACAD)
Take account (of)*	1176	A formula would have to be developed which took account of these differences (ACAD)
Take action	591	They started by taking action that diminished government receipts (NEWS)
Take care of *	539	All he needs is someone to take care of him, ' (NEWS)
Take time	438	Pasta contains complex carbohydrates so takes time to be digested. (NEWS)

Those marked with an asterisk (*) can take not only a prepositional passive but also can easily take a passive for which the idiomatically-fixed direct object becomes subject; e.g. *In 1636 Mersenne made a series of tests on wires of different materials but it is doubtful if any use was made of the information.* Spanish tends to use in these cases the reflexive pronoun “se” instead of the standard passive. A search of the Spanish counterpart of *take account (of)* proves that this collocation is highly abundant in newspapers, with 111 tokens in CREA e.g. *esa asociación no se toma en cuenta al empresariado nacional* [National employers are not taken account of in that association].

SPANISH

We have studied the equivalent phraseological units whenever possible in the Spanish corpus. There are several viable translations into Spanish (i.e. *take responsibility*>*tomar, asumir/adoptar responsabilidad, ser responsable de*) but we have only worked with the direct translation to see the quantitative differences between languages. The quantitative data are shown in the boxes below.

d) Selected noun phrases combining with *tener* in news which have got a direct translation from English into Spanish:

<i>MULTI-WORD UNIT</i>	<i>NUMBER OF TOKENS</i>	<i>EXAMPLE</i>
Tener problemas[<i>have problems</i>]	360/143	Parece ser que en teoría, el líder no debe tener problemas. (NEWS)
Tener acceso a[<i>have access to</i>]	329/156	...según el titular de esa cartera, podrán tener acceso a una amplia... (NEWS)

Tener ventaja[<i>have an/the advantage</i>]	14/12	Al descanso el equipo blanco ya tenía ventaja en el marcador de catorce puntos (NEWS)
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According to Koike (2001: 85) *tener* is the second most frequent verb in Spanish after *dar* + substantive. Some collocations refer to qualities (*tener belleza, curiosidad, etc [to have beauty, curiosity, etc.]*) and others refer to feelings *tener/sentir aburrimiento, amor por, etc. [feel bored, love for]*. *Tener* is combined with some nouns using the possessive to form functional collocations such as *tener su inicio/origen/causa/apogeo/auge/esplendor [have its beginning/origin/cause/height/ peak/splendour.]*.

e) Selected noun phrases combining with *hacer* in news, which have got a direct translation from English collocations with *make* into Spanish. Collocations translated by a single word are not included, such as *make amends*>*enmendar* or *make assumptions*>*suponer*.

<i>MULTI-WORD UNIT</i>	<i>NUMBER OF TOKENS</i>	<i>EXAMPLE</i>
Hacer uso de [<i>make use of</i>]	772/183	que Estados Unidos se dispone, por segunda vez, a hacer uso de las reservas...(NEWS)
Hacer progresos [<i>make progress</i>]	5/0	Empezaban a hacer progresos en el inglés (FICTION)

Among our news samples, *hacer* is the second most prolific verb for creating collocations in Spanish. According to Dubský (1965: 348), quoted in Koike (2001: 87), collocates with this verb tend to be abstract nouns, while collocates of *dar* [to give] tend to be concrete. Finally, students must become aware that some collocations with *hacer* convey both a literal and metaphorical meaning: '*hacer la maleta*' means 'to pack/ make your luggage' and also takes on a metaphorical value 'get ready for going somewhere'. The CREA just registers one example in the literal sense, more frequent in fictional narrative (14 tokens).

f) Selected noun phrases combining with *tomar* in news which have got a direct translation from English collocations with *take* into Spanish and constitute a sort of miscellaneous category (Koike 2001: 89). Notice that in Spanish they are far less frequent in general terms. Collocations that translate by a single word *take care of*>*cuidar*, *take action*>*actuar* are not included.

<i>MULTI-WORD UNIT</i>	<i>NUMBER OF TOKENS</i>	<i>EXAMPLE</i>
Tomar en cuenta	840/277	Me imagino que tendrán que tener en cuenta el futuro del país (NEWS)
Tomar ventaja	31/14	Tomar ventaja en la serie final de la Liga Municipal (NEWS)
Tomar(se) tiempo	6/1	El juez debió tomarse tiempo y matizar los hechos (NEWS)

2. Discussion of findings and conclusion

The collocational patterns under study here, delexicalised verb + noun collocations, are related to what is typically said, rather than what can be said, but they admit lexical, diatopical, register and tense variation.

From a quantitative point of view, we expected to find more collocations with *have* than with *make* or *take*, as it is the commonest delexicalised verb in English. Nonetheless, its figures are significantly lower if compared to the other verbs, showing there is no correlation between high frequency verbs and their collocations. Collocations with *take* outnumber by far those with *have* and *make*, with two exceptions: *make use of* (683 tokens) and *have access* (631). These two collocations also rank among the highest in Spanish, thus showing a parallel use in written texts in the two languages with 772 tokens for *hacer uso de* and 329 for *tener acceso a*.

The total figures for delexicalised verb collocations are much lower in Spanish. This may be due to the specific compilation design of each corpus: CREA offers many more genre and diatopical variance than the BNC. Consequently, although both prove that two different standard corpus models can co-exist, comparisons based on genre and corpus features may be hindered. A good example of such divergent compilation is CREA, whose 49% of the written texts belongs to the news genre (50% of those representing Peninsular Spanish), whereas written books and periodicals are grouped together in the BNC. This may additionally explain the aforementioned low Spanish figures. In spite of these difficulties for comparison, similar patterns of frequency use appear among the collocations in the two languages, with the exception of *make progress*, with 121 tokens in English and just 5 in Spanish (*hacer progresos*), owing to the existence of a single word unit in this latter (*progresar*), more economic in most contexts and therefore overwhelmingly frequent in CREA (542 tokens in all texts). In a similar fashion, economy, together with register, conditions the incidence of collocations like *hacer uso de* [make use of], well under that of its synonym *usar* [use] with 6,197 tokens.

From a qualitative point of view, this bilingual comparison exercise of delexicalised verb collocations renders interesting insights about certain coincident phenomena worthy of attention in both languages: first of all, their overall association with abstract nouns. Secondly, their favouring of those clusters tending to portray a factual view of reality (*take account of*, *have access/tener acceso a*). News, moreover, does present conflictive situations and problems [reflected in the collocations *have problems/ tener problemas*] and their possible solutions, and hence resorts to down-to-earth and practical collocations such as *make use of* or its Spanish counterpart '*hacer uso de*' or '*take advantage of/tomar ventaja*'. As to this latter, its alternative choice *aventajar* is surprisingly much less ubiquitous (32 tokens in all genres and 19 in journalese), which may be attributed to its more elaborate prepositional regime (*aventajar a* + noun phrase). Thirdly, nouns play a decisive role in both English and Spanish collocations because they select the verb and its syntactic demands. ESL and ELE teachers should highlight these contrasts if they want their students to profit from collocations akin to native speakers.

It is extremely important that L2 learners grasp not only the conventional grammar but also collocations in connection with Syntax, Semantics and Pragmatics. Furthermore, awareness of the collocational points of contact and divergence should be raised among teachers and students in order to facilitate acquisition by underscoring the potential lexical, genre and register differences.

It also deserves great interest to compare these findings with data from languages other than English and Spanish. We have perceived that standard bilingual dictionaries include common sets of predictable collocations, but disregard many which are unpredictable or sets of predictable ones with *have/make/take* and their Spanish counterparts.

Apart from the examples studied in this paper, The DUFIE dictionary pursues to offer standard and typical phraseology of other types, simultaneously available to language learners and other interested parties with an on-line dictionary as a reference database identifying and translating multi-word units in both English and Spanish. The Internet is playing an increasingly crucial role in sorting out the most recurrent and widely used grammatical and lexical collocations to overcome the limitations of corpora.

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