

A Corpus-Based Study on Synonyms in Chinese Learners' English: A Case Study of "Affair" and "Event"

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Abstract: Using British National Corpus (BNC) as the reference corpus and Chinese Learner's English Corpus (CLEC) as the observed corpus, this paper attempts to analyze synonyms in Chinese learners' English based on "event" and "affair." By comparing the frequency, colligation, collocates, and semantic prosody of the two words in BNC, it is found that "event" and "affair" differ from each other in terms of frequency and semantic prosody. The same comparison is made between BNC and CLEC. It is found that Chinese learners' English vocabulary is rather small, and there is no significant difference in the semantic prosody of the two words between English native speakers and Chinese English learners except that Chinese English learners have a misunderstanding about "love affair," which may be attributed to their negligence of semantic prosody in the process of learning.

Keywords: Synonyms; Chinese English learners; Semantic prosody

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1. Introduction

Since the study of synonyms is an effective way of expanding vocabulary, synonyms have always been a focus of language teaching and learning. Synonyms are quite common in English because there are numerous loan words in English, especially those from French. Chinese English learners may have difficulties in learning synonyms due to the minute differences among synonyms. Fortunately, it has been proven that corpus-based study is an effective way to analyze synonyms. Therefore, using British National Corpus (BNC) as the reference corpus and Chinese Learner's English Corpus (CLEC) as the observed corpus, this paper attempts to analyze synonyms in Chinese learners' English based on the terms "event" and "affair." Two comparisons are made in this paper. Firstly, the frequency, colligation, collocates, and semantic prosody of the two words are compared based on the data from BNC in order to explore the differences between "affair" and "event"; then, a comparison of the usage of the two words in BNC and CLEC is done to determine whether there are differences in the usage of synonyms between native English speakers and Chinese English learners. This paper also explores the factors that may cause the differences.

2. Methodology

British National Corpus (BNC) is selected as the reference corpus and Chinese Learner's English Corpus (CLEC), as the observed corpus. BNC contains about 100 million tokens while CLEC has 1,218,517 tokens.

BNC is searched online, and AntConc is used as the searching tool to search CLEC. Firstly, the frequencies of the terms, “affair” and “event,” in the two corpora are compared. Secondly, the colligations of the two words are extracted. Then, the collocates ($MI > 3$) of the two words are selected by setting the span as 1L. Finally, based on the selected collocates, this paper analyzes the semantic prosody of “affair” and “event.”

3. Data analysis and discussion

3.1. Comparison of frequency

Firstly, the frequency of “affair” is analyzed. In BNC, “affair,” as a lemma, appears 9,977 times, among which its singular form appears 3,073 times, while its plural form appears 6,904 times. In CLEC, “affair,” as a lemma, appears 35 times, among which its singular form appears 10 times, while its plural form appears 25 times. “Event,” as a lemma, appears 20,439 times in BNC and 57 times in CLEC; its singular form appears 10,227 times in BNC and 20 times in CLEC, while its plural form appears 10,212 times in BNC and 37 times in CLEC. The data on their total frequency (lemma) are shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Comparison of frequency

	BNC (size: 100m)	CLEC (size: 1.23m)	Chi-square	Significance
“Affair”	9977	35	60.72	0.000000
“Event”	20439	57	146.93	0.000000

Considering the size of each corpus and frequency of “affair” in each corpus, this paper calculates the chi-square in order to determine whether this difference is statistically significant. The result shows that the frequency of “affair” (9,977times) in BNC is significantly larger than that of “affair” (35 times) in CLEC ($X^2 = 60.72$). The same calculation is done for the frequency of “event.” The result indicates that the frequency of “event” (20,439 times) in BNC is significantly larger than that of “event” (37 times) in CLEC ($X^2 = 146.93$).

3.2. Colligations of “affair” and “event”

The colligations of “affair” and “event” are extracted from large amounts of data.

- (1) Adjective + affair/event (domestic, international, foreign, etc.)

Example 1.

Perhaps he couldn’t bear to, perhaps it was just that he felt that marriage is a **private affair**.
Now, the Rotary Club is hoping that the party will become an **annual event**.

- (2) Noun + affair/event (love, community, etc.)

Example 2.

It’s a film called Seventh Heaven, which is about a **love affair** in the sewers in 1927.
They conclude that the onset or relapse of schizophrenia is associated either with high EE or with an independent **life event**.

- (3) Art (determiner) + affair/event (the, an)

Example 3.

There is a tide in **the affairs** of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.
The event – MTV Music Video Awards – looks set to be a who’s-who of rock greats.

(4) Number + affair/event (two, three, etc.)

Example 4.

I just wondered whether the timing of the **two affairs** overlapped, that's all.
On Wednesday, there are **two events** – an arena trial and a chat show.

(5) Prep + art + event + prep

Example 5.

The worst of it is that one cannot yet express a proper anger about the state of things, since it is just about possible that the Frauleins Krabbe, Breuer, and Moller are innocent of any serious wrongdoing (if that's the right term) **in the affair of** the Uniform Urine.

In the event of having to evacuate the council chamber would everyone leave by one of the two exits at the rear of the chamber.

Among the five kinds of colligations above, the first four kinds are common in the data of both “event” and “affair” data, while the last colligation is more common in the data of “event” compared to “affair.”

3.3. Collocates and semantic prosody of “affair”

3.3.1. Collocates and semantic prosody of “affair” in BNC

In this section, collocates and semantic prosody of “affair” are analyzed. Firstly, 100 collocates (MI > 3; span: 1L) of “affair” are selected from BNC. Then, based on these collocates, this paper analyzes the semantic prosody of “affair.”

The 100 collocates can be classified into four kinds, including words referring to geographical areas (24 types), a particular domain (20 types), personal activities (6 types), and other kinds. Geographical areas include words such as “foreign,” “internal,” and “European.” Words referring to a particular domain include “social,” “political,” “commercial,” etc. Personal activities refer to words such as “love,” “private,” and “personal.” Since the rest of the words do not show any significant features, they are classified into other kinds. The classification of these collocates is shown in **Table 2**.

In general, “affair” has neutral semantic prosody; for example, “international affair,” “business affair,” “foreign affair,” “African affair,” “private affair,” etc. However, by looking through the context of each collocate, this paper finds some collocates with negative semantic prosody, such as “love,” “passionate,” “casual,” “sordid,” “Rushdie,” and “secret.” Phrases such as “love affair,” “passionate affair,” “casual affair,” and “secret affair” have similar meanings, referring to “a romantic and usually sexual relationship between two people who love each other but who are not married or living together” according to Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner’s Dictionary. Usually, this kind of love relationship is not accepted by the society. Some of the concordances are listed here.

Example 6.

She will play a bored wife who scandalizes her village in the 1920s by having a passionate **love affair** with a young pianist.

I have a feeling that most women want more than just a **casual affair**.

She just knew she was going to have a mad, **passionate affair** with him.

By 1859, she and Edward Bulwer-Lytton (later, first Earl of Lytton, q.v.) were having a **secret affair**.

“Sordid affair” (MI = 8.50) is also a typical collocate, whose negative semantic prosody is strong.

Example 7.

All concerned should be cross-examined to get to the bottom of the whole **sordid affair**.

George Broomham was questioned, but only briefly, before he admitted the whole **sordid affair**.

In addition, “affair” can refer to a certain historical event. For instance, “Rushdie affair” is a proper term, which refers to a major controversy provoked by Salman Rushdie’s novel – *The Satanic Verses*. This novel was protested fiercely by Muslims in several countries. Death threats were made against him, including a fatwa calling for his assassination issued by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader of Iran, on February 14, 1989, and as a result, he was placed under police protection by the British government. “Rushdie affair” is discussed heatedly by the British society at that time. Therefore, “Rushdie affair” has negative semantic prosody.

Example 8.

The **Rushdie affair** cannot help but set back hopes for an early release for the Western hostages in Lebanon.

It can be concluded from the analysis above that “affair” is a word that refers to specific activities in a certain field. It can also refer to secret love relationships, which are not accepted by the society. Besides, phrases such as “love affair” have negative semantic prosody. “Affair” can also be combined with a proper term in order to refer to a certain historical event.

Table 2. Collocates of “affair” in BNC

	Types (MI)	Percentage
Geographical areas	Foreign (9.27), internal (8.53), international (5.98), external (7.83), domestic (6.54), world (3.38), European (4.32), Welsh (6.60), Scottish (5.10), provincial (5.78), regional (4.98), African (5.76), Indian (5.7), Westland (10.29), Asian (5.56), Eastern (3.92), Macao (9.99), Irish (3.75), mainland (6.10), Korean (5.95), Orkney (6.35), and Palestinian (8.09).	22%
A particular domain	Current (7.04), social (5.38), public (5.41), economic (5.93), financial (6.14), consumer (7.54), political (4.56), corporate (7.02), business (3.61), legal (5.02), military (5.14), parliamentary (6.48), constitutional (5.58), civil (3.53), commercial (3.29), presidential (4.92), tax (3.79), security (3.12), expatriate (9.07), administrative (4.93), municipal (6.79), religious (6.77), Islamic (6.77), and ecclesiastical (7.46).	24%
Personal activities	Love (6.65), private (4.51), personal (4.13), passionate (7.44), casual (6.20), and secret (3.45).	6%
Other kinds	Sordid (8.50), own (4.40), an (3.52), etc.	48%
Total	100 types	100%

3.3.2. Collocates and semantic prosody of “affair” in CLEC

Following a careful observation of “affair” in BNC is a thorough examination of the same word in CLEC. Collocates and semantic prosody of “affair” are analyzed. Firstly, all the collocates (except grammatical words) of “affair” are selected from CLEC (as the relevant data from CLEC are scarce). Then, based on these collocates, this paper analyzes the semantic prosody of “affair.”

The collocates of “affair” in CLEC still can be classified into four kinds: geographical areas (3 types), a particular domain (7 types), personal activities (3 types), and other kinds (17 types). The data are shown in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Collocates of “affair” in CLEC

	Types	Percentage
Geographical areas	World, international, and internal.	17.6%
A particular domain	Trade, current, finance, diplomatic, revolutionary, personnel, and environmental.	41.2%
Personal activities	Your, love, family	17.6%
Other kinds	women, school, moving, and important.	23.5%
Total	17 types	100%

As can be seen from the data above, collocates of “affair” lack variety (only 17 types). It is obvious that Chinese English learners make some mistakes in the semantic prosody of “affair” as they tend to disregard the negative meaning of “affair” when it is used with “love.”

Example 9.

“Don’t be silly. Little girl.” She behaved like an expert in **love affairs** when she tenderly patted on my shoulder.

The disciplines in GUFL are much looser compared to Dan Middle School; there you can smoke, drink, speak freely, and have **love affairs**. Students have free and colorful lives.

It can be seen from the examples above that Chinese English learners regard “love affair” as a romantic love relationship between young people. The reason why they make such mistakes may be that they only interpret the literal meaning of “love affair” but neglect the semantic prosody of this noun phrase, which may be a result of the teaching and learning methods in China, where students are required to remember words in their vocabulary list, without paying much attention to the actual context in which the words are used. As a result, students only remember the literal meaning of each word without understanding the usage of each word. Therefore, this is of no surprise that they would only know the literal meaning of the words they learn.

3.3.3. Comparing the collocates and semantic prosody of “affair” in BNC and CLEC

It can be concluded from the analysis above that “affair” is a word that is often used in the context of politics, economy, society, etc., and there are mistakes in the semantic prosody of “affair” among Chinese learners. For example, “love affair” is used negatively in BNC, but it is used non-negatively or even positively in CLEC, which may be caused by an incomplete understanding of English vocabulary. In addition, collocates of “affair” in CLEC are far less than that in BNC, indicating that Chinese learners’ English vocabulary is rather small and lacks variety.

3.4. Collocates and semantic prosody of “event”**3.4.1. Collocates and semantic prosody of “event” in BNC**

In this section, the collocates and semantic prosody of “event” are analyzed. Firstly, 100 collocates (MI > 3; span: 1L) of “event” are selected from BNC. Then, based on these collocates, this paper analyzes the semantic prosody of “event.”

It is found that the collocates of “event” are much more than that of “affair.” “Event” and “affair” share some collocates, such as “current,” “social,” “cultural,” etc. In addition to the collocates they share, “event” has many other collocates. For example, “special event,” “stressful event,” “sporting event,” etc. Moreover, it is found that “event” is more likely to be associated with personal feelings or attitude, while “affair” does not share this feature. For instance, “stressful event,” “sad event,” etc. Some of the typical collocates of

“event” are listed in **Table 4**.

Table 4. Collocates of “event” in BNC

Collocates	MI	Collocates	MI
Tragic	6.17	Stressful	7.52
Social	4.15	Catastrophic	7.30
Major	4.34	Extraordinary	4.44
Sporting	8.52	Sad	4.45
Traumatic	7.94	Historic	5.06
Sponsored	7.02	Current	3.29
Momentous	8.63	Cultural	4.42

Based on the analysis of collocates and context of “event,” it is not difficult to appreciate that the semantic prosody of “event” is generally neutral; for example, “cultural event,” “sporting event,” “major event,” “sponsored event,” “social event,” etc. However, some of the collocates have strong negative semantic prosody, such as “stressful,” “catastrophic,” “tragic,” “traumatic,” etc. Some of the concordances are listed below.

Example 10.

His parting was a **traumatic event**, which burrowed conservative lovers of scenic beauty and wide-open spaces into direct conflict with the new breed of activists in their outlook.

He’d tried, in a roundabout fashion, on the telephone to get some information as to Harriet’s means of support, pointing out that there might be others who should be informed of the **tragic event**.

Curiously enough, it was a **sad event** which did as much as anything in 1992 to help me put my own worries into perspective.

In addition, the phrase “in the event of,” which is mentioned in section 3.2., has a strong negative semantic prosody, which means “if something bad happens.”

Example 11.

Very reassuring, Mr Gordon, we’re not necessarily going to have a year’s warning that that we’re going to need these aircraft **in the event of** war.

A former commander of the SAS, who would be thrust into the frontline **in the event of** a terrorist attack, said, “Not only has he put the security of our royal family at risk, but he has also jeopardized the lives of the Special Air Service regiment troops.

All in all, “event” is a common word that has a wide variety of collocates. Its’ collocates are much more than that of “affair.” Besides, “event” can be associated with personal feelings or attitude, while “affair” cannot, which means that “affair” is more objective than “event.” Generally speaking, “event” has a neutral semantic prosody, and a few of its collocates indicate that sometimes “event” is used with negative semantic prosody.

3.4.2. Collocates and semantic prosody of “event” in CLEC

The collocates and semantic prosody of “event” in CLEC are analyzed in this section. Since the data from CLEC is scarce, all of its collocates (except grammatical words) are listed in **Table 5**.

Table 5. Collocates of “event” in CLEC

Collocates	Frequency	Collocates	Frequency
Natural	9	Great	1
Current	6	Sporting	1
Important	4	Murder	1
World	2	Large	1
Exciting	2	Killing	1
New	1	Sudden	1

Similarly, the collocates of “event” in CLEC are much more than that of “affair,” and some phrases express personal feelings or attitude, such as “great event” and “exciting event.” However, the phrase “in the event of” is not included in CLEC, which may be caused by scarce data or a result of the limited language proficiency of Chinese English learners. In addition, as can be seen from **Table 5**, “natural event” occurs nine times. After analyzing the whole text of “natural event,” it is noted that “natural event” is used to describe “euthanasia,” which is an assigned topic of students’ essays; that is the reason for the frequent occurrence of “natural event” in CLEC.

Based on the analysis of collocates and context of “event,” it is not difficult to appreciate that the semantic prosody of “event” is also generally neutral in CLEC; for example, “world event,” “large event,” etc. However, there are still some collocates that have negative semantic prosody, such as “murder.”

Example 12.

Before they graduate from high schools, they have watched 350,000 advertisements and 19,000 **murder events** on television. Transmission of aggression may lead to the imitation of aggressive morals.

Although “killing event” seems to be negative, it has neutral semantic prosody. It is part of the phrase “mercy killing event,” which denotes euthanasia. The context of “killing event” is extracted from the corpus.

Example 13.

In addition, mercy killing is humane; it is a measure to hasten the death of human beings for the sake of mercy. The court considers euthanasia as murder in the beginning during the emergence of this phenomenon. The most famous mercy **killing event** in America’s history involves Dr. Herman N. Sanders, who had given his patient four lethal injections of air, resulting in painless death in minutes.

3.4.3. Comparison of collocates and semantic prosody of “event” in BNC and CLEC

It can be summarized from the analysis above that collocates of “event” in CLEC lack variety, indicating that the vocabulary of Chinese English learners is rather small. In terms of semantic prosody, there is no significant difference between native English speakers and Chinese English learners. In addition, since the CLEC data are collected from the assigned essays of Chinese students, the given topics of their essays occur frequently in the corpus, which may affect the results.

4. Conclusion

This study proves that corpora analysis is an effective way to differentiate synonyms. Corpus is a dynamic reflection of the actual usage of a certain language, which is an advantage that traditional dictionaries do not have. Besides, in this paper, it is found that the vocabulary of Chinese English learners is rather small. Therefore, Chinese students have to make effort to expand their vocabulary. Additionally, this paper

discovers some semantic prosody mistakes that have been made by Chinese English learners, which may be a result of the negligence of semantic prosody in the process of English teaching and learning. Therefore, English teachers have to pay much attention to the semantic prosody of words, rather than focusing on the literal meaning of each word.

It should be acknowledged that the classification of semantic prosody in this paper is relatively subjective. Moreover, since CLEC is not large enough compared with BNC, the data of Chinese English learners are scarce, thus leading to some difficulties in the process of data analysis.

Disclosure statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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