

To err is not all: What corpus and elicitation can reveal about the use of collocations by learners

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*Es irrt der Mensch,
so lang er strebt.*
J.W. von Goethe, *Faust*

Abstract: This article studies advanced French-speaking learners' knowledge of *make*-collocations. It suggests that, while an investigation of the errors found in a learner corpus may be enlightening, it should ideally be complemented by two other types of analyses, namely a comparison of the learner corpus data with native data, which highlights phenomena of overuse or underuse, and elicitation tests, which focus on competence rather than performance. Using such a threefold approach, this study shows that, while the learners under study do not make many errors, they tend to underuse *make*-collocations and limit themselves to those which have a direct equivalent in their mother tongues and are therefore safer. When forced to produce certain collocations or judge their acceptability, on the other hand, they reveal their collocational deficiencies and unreliable judgements.

1. Introduction

In 1933, Palmer noted the difficulty combinations such as *to ask a question*, *to do a favour*, *to give trouble* or *to have patience* present for learners of English. His remark was intuitive, based on the idea that learners should tend to form such combinations by guess work or by analogy with their mother tongues, producing unusual expressions such as *to make a question*, *to perform a favour*, *to do trouble* or *to keep patience*. Since then, it has been widely recognised that such combinations, now referred to as collocations, are usually difficult for learners to master (cf. Howarth 1998a) and that, next to aspects such as grammar or spelling, phraseology is a serious issue to reckon with in Foreign Language Teaching (FLT).

This article focuses on collocations with the high-frequency verb *make* and examines how they are used by advanced French-speaking learners of English. In an attempt to get an overall picture of this phenomenon, two sources of data will be exploited, namely corpus data and elicitation data. After briefly discussing the problem collocations with high-frequency verbs pose for learners and how this problem has been dealt with in the literature, more will be said about the multi-method approach adopted here. The results of the study will then be set out in three stages: an analysis of the errors made by learners in free production, an analysis of the collocations that learners favour or avoid in comparison with native speakers, and an analysis of learners' collocational knowledge as emerging from fill-in and evaluation exercises. Finally, the implications of this study for FLT will be briefly discussed.

2. Collocations with high-frequency verbs

High-frequency verbs have this particular feature that they “enter into a wide range of Expressions and patterns” (Lewis 1997: 75), or collocations,¹ forming what is regularly referred to as “light verb constructions”, that is, constructions in which the verb has little or no semantic content of its own, and the verbal meaning is expressed by the noun phrase accompanying it (Trask 1993), e.g. *give a sigh*, *have a look*, *make a wish* or *take a walk*.² Such expressions are particularly difficult for learners,³ who are normally familiar with the basic meaning of the verb, but may not be aware of their collocates. This is made even worse by the fact that light verb constructions often exhibit treacherous differences cross-linguistically, as shown for example by Nehls (1991) for English *do/make*, German *tun/machen* and Dutch *doen/maken*.⁴ As a consequence, learners often make lexical choices which result in “collocational dissonance” (Carter 1987, Hasselgren 1994), with sentences correct from a grammatical point of view, but still non-native-like.

Several studies have provided empirical evidence to highlight the problems encountered by learners when producing collocations. Some of them, especially the earliest ones, were performed within the framework of Error Analysis, observing small amounts of learner writing and pinpointing the errors found in these texts. This is the approach adopted by Lennon (1996), whose study of lexical verb choice relies on 60 English texts written by 4 German-speaking subjects, from which all the errors were extracted and analysed. On the basis of these errors, he was able to show that, when choosing a verb, learners are influenced by their mother tongues, but also experience more fundamental problems, among which lack of knowledge of

¹ In Howarth (1996), the verb + noun combinations investigated display an average percentage of 40% of restricted collocations and idioms, but this proportion rises to 69% for *give*, 73% for *take* and 95% for *make*.

² The fact that the verbal meaning should be expressed by the noun phrase, rather than by the verb, is the main criterion that was used here for the selection of the *make*-collocations. It was not considered essential that the light verb construction be replaceable by a derivationally related single verb (like *make a decision*/*to decide*, but unlike *make an effort*/**to effort*). See Langer (2004) for a list of possible tests to identify light verb constructions.

³ It is interesting to note that collocations can at times be challenging for native speakers too, as shown by Howarth (1998b).

⁴ See also Altenberg (2001), who shows that the light verb *make* and its equivalent in Swedish, *göra*, are translated by each other in less than 30% of the cases.

collocational probabilities and restrictions. While “spontaneous” errors (i.e. errors found in free, uncontrolled production data) are an important facet of learners’ problem with collocations, they are not all, and by focusing exclusively on errors, one may overlook some crucial aspects of learners’ collocational knowledge.

The appearance of learner corpora (see Granger 1998a) has made it possible to go further into the analysis of learners’ performance. Not only do learner corpora represent large and carefully compiled collections of authentic data, machine-readable and hence automatically searchable, but compared with a control corpus of native language, they can also reveal phenomena of over- and underuse, that is, cases where learners use significantly more or significantly less of a particular linguistic item than native speakers. Kaszubski (2000) is a good illustration of this type of corpus-based approach. On the basis of a corpus of essays written by Polish learners of English, he demonstrates that some collocations occur with a frequency that is significantly different from their frequency in native English, which underlines learners’ strong predilections for some expressions and their reluctance to use others. What corpus-based studies cannot establish, however, is the extent to which collocations which are not produced by a learner are part, or not, of his/her mental lexicon. Because a learner does not produce a particular collocation does not mean that s/he does not know it (s/he may simply not need it in this specific context), but this is a side of the coin to which corpus-based approaches have no access.

Some linguists, using a more controlled method of data collection, have studied the other side of the coin, namely learners’ competence (as opposed to performance). Bahns & Eldaw (1993), for example, use a translation task and a cloze task to test a number of English verb-noun collocations. By having their subjects, advanced German-speaking learners of English, translate specific expressions or fill in particular parts of a sentence, they are able to determine the learners’ actual knowledge of the target collocations, showing that this knowledge lags far behind their knowledge of vocabulary in general and that more emphasis should consequently be placed on collocations in EFL instruction.

Only rarely have both sides of the coin been studied, with an emphasis on performance as well as competence.⁵ Yet, Granger’s (1998b) collocational analysis of amplifying adverbs, which combines corpus data and elicitation data, demonstrates the usefulness of such an approach. The next section explains how this type of multi-method approach was applied to collocations with the high-frequency verb *make*.

3. Multi-method approach

Using a multi-method approach is a way of responding to the remark that “no one method will provide an entirely valid picture of what a learner knows or thinks” (Ellis & Barkhuizen 2005: 49).⁶ Here, corpus data and elicitation data were combined to offer deeper insights into the knowledge of *make*-collocations by advanced French-speaking learners of English. The corpus analysis is partly based on Borgatti (2006) and relies on (i) ICLE-FR, a component of the International Corpus of Learner English (Granger et al. 2002) containing essays written by French-speaking learners [202,957 words], and (ii) LOCNESS-US, the American component of the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays, a comparable corpus of native English [168,314 words],⁷ from which all the occurrences of a form of the verb *make* were extracted automatically and the collocational uses among these were selected manually. Although the essays contained in ICLE and LOCNESS had to be written on a particular subject and were thus, to some extent, constrained by the topic, they can still be considered as lying towards the freer pole of the continuum between controlled and uncontrolled production data (see Källkvist 1998).

Elicitation data are, by definition, controlled, since elicitation is aimed at inducing some specific linguistic feature. The test used for this study was performed at the University of Louvain (UCL) in February 2006 and was taken by 19 learners of English, all of them native speakers of French and in their third year of study. It took place during regular classes and consisted of two types of exercises, one of them a fill-in exercise and the other an evaluation exercise. In the first exercise, the students were asked to fill in sentences with a verb of their choice, on the basis of the French translation provided for the sentence, e.g.

- (1) She _____ the choice of never seeing her son again.
= Elle fit le choix de ne plus jamais revoir son fils.

They were also required to indicate their degree of certainty, using a scale ranging from 0 (“don’t know the answer, made a guess”) to 3 (“absolutely sure of the answer”). The 25 sentences of the exercise were all authentic sentences, extracted from LOCNESS and translated by me. Some of them included a congruent collocation, that is a collocation having a direct, word-for-word equivalent in French (e.g. *make an offer* = *faire une offre*), whereas others included a non-congruent collocation, in which the English and the French verbs did not correspond (e.g. *make a commitment* = *prendre un engagement*, literally “take”). In the evaluation exercise, the students were presented with 20 sentences and had to decide whether the underlined elements, corresponding to the collocation, were acceptable or not, e.g.

- (2) The candidate had made promises to local groups of voters on behalf of the government.

⁵ Hasselgren (1994) combines her fill-in exercises with the analysis of students’ written work, but the texts analysed are translations and are therefore constrained by the presence of the original text. In Källkvist (1998), the data consist of three written tasks with varying degrees of control, namely free composition, recall of a short narrative and translation tests. The free composition data, however, are better described as a small collection of (17) essays than as a proper corpus.

⁶ For the use of such a multi-method approach in native English, see e.g. de Mönnink (1997).

⁷ See <http://www.fltr.ucl.ac.be/fltr/germ/etan/cecl/Cecl-Projects/Icle/locness1.htm> (last accessed on 12 November 2006).

Again, they had to indicate their degree of certainty, using the same 0-3 scale as in the fill-in exercise. In addition, the students were asked to correct, whenever possible, the sentences they judged unacceptable. The sentences came from LOCNESS for the acceptable collocations and from ICLE (essentially the French component, but also the German and Japanese components) for the unacceptable collocations. The questionnaires distributed to the students comprised both the fill-in exercise and the evaluation exercise. The test items within each exercise were ordered randomly, so that each questionnaire contained the same items but in a different order.⁸ While the test included collocations with several verbs (including *make*, *do*, *take* and *give*), only the results for the collocations involving *make* will be discussed here.

Before we turn to the analysis proper, an important caveat is in order concerning the combination of the corpus data and the elicitation data. It should be borne in mind that they have been produced by different populations – the students who wrote the essays included in ICLE-FR and the students who took the elicitation test. While the ideal would be to have an L2-database consisting of free and controlled production data by the same learners, a certain homogeneity is ensured by the fact that the authors of the ICLE-FR essays and the respondents to the elicitation test have very similar profiles: they are all advanced learners of English, native speakers of French, come from the same university and, in part, have been taught by the same professors. This similarity should be enough to guarantee the comparability of the data.

4. The use of *make*-collocations by learners: a three-stage analysis

4.1. Exploring the learner corpus data: error analysis

The first stage of this analysis consists in examining the learner corpus data for their own sake, identifying the errors made by the learners.⁹ A collocation was considered as incorrect if it was judged as such by the native speakers that were consulted. Following Nesselhauf (2005), cases where the choice of the noun phrase was inappropriate (e.g. **make huge benefits*, instead of *make huge profits*) were also counted as errors.

ICLE-FR contains 469 occurrences of one of the forms of the verb *make*, of which 171 are collocations, as shown in Table 1. Incorrect *make*-collocations amount to 12, thus accounting for 2.6% of all the occurrences of *make* and 7% of all the occurrences of a *make*-collocation. While these proportions are higher than in a corpus such as ICLE-DU (Dutch component of ICLE), where incorrect *make*-collocations represent 0.9% of all the occurrences of *make* and 1.3% of all the occurrences of a *make*-collocation, they still point to a reasonably good knowledge of collocations with *make*, since out of 100 collocations, the learners would on average make a mere 7 errors.¹⁰ However, it should be emphasised that collocational errors represent a large proportion of all the errors made by the learners, namely 57.1% (12/21). In other words, the learners may not commit many errors when producing a collocation with *make*, but most of the errors they commit when using the verb *make* are of this type. And in this respect, Dutch learners do not fare much better, with half of their errors being collocational errors.

Occurrences of <i>make</i>	469
Occurrences of <i>make</i> -collocations	171
Errors with <i>make</i>	21
Errors with <i>make</i> -collocations	12

Table 1. Results of error analysis in ICLE-FR (based on Borgatti 2006)

Going further than statistics, we can examine the types of errors that the learners commit when producing a collocation with *make*. Table 2 shows that the most common type of error concerns the choice of the verb (50%). In half of the cases, the learners have mixed up *make* and *do*, as illustrated by (3), which is to be expected given that French has only one verb, *faire*, to cover the meanings of the two English verbs.¹¹ In the other cases, *make* has been confused with another verb (*put*, *give* or *find*), as exemplified by (4). The other two types of errors, with a proportion of 25% each, are the use of a collocation where a simple verb should have been used, as in (5), and errors on the noun phrase, as in (6).

- (3) In the first part of the novel, another activity takes place: Lily is **making a painting** but she cannot complete it. [ICLE-FR]
 (□ doing a painting)

⁸ I thank Marie-Catherine de Marneffe for her help with the randomisation of the test items.

⁹ The results presented in this section are based on Borgatti (2006). Note that collocations in which *make* should have been used (e.g. *do an effort* instead of *make an effort*) have not been taken into account.

¹⁰ This can be compared with the results obtained by Nesselhauf (2004) for German-speaking learners, whose error rate for *make*-collocations amounts to 31.6%. This higher rate may be due to German students' tendency to be risk-takers (see Biskup 1992: 88).

¹¹ Much more frequent, however, is the use of *do* in cases where *make* should have been used. This accounts for over 70% of all the collocational errors with *do*, e.g.

- (i) And that is **the mistake most people do** before committing a crime: they think this is the only way of escape. [ICLE-FR]
 (□ the mistake most people make)

- (4) Progressively, thanks to vivid **descriptions made** in a rich language (...), the picture of a society which is superficial comes before our eyes. [ICLE-FR]
☐ descriptions given)
- (5) On the one hand, some people are still against the idea of Europe, or other people claim they are for union, but actually they **make separations** in their own country. [ICLE-FR]
☐ divide their own country)
- (6) This **reflexion made** by Denis when talking with Jenny one morning is very relevant for the whole meaning of Huxley's novel. [ICLE-FR]
☐ remark made)

Errors on <i>make</i>	6 (50%)
Collocation instead of simple verb	3 (25%)
Errors on noun phrase	3 (25%)
Total	12 (100%)

Table 2. Types of errors in *make*-collocations (based on Borgatti 2006)

Finally, it is possible to discern, among the errors, possible cases of negative transfer, that is, incorrect collocations which seem to have their origins in the learner's mother tongue. Thus, in (4) above, the learner has used the verb *make* instead of *give*. While in French *donner une description* ("give a description") is acceptable, the verb *faire* ("make") is also regularly used in combination with the noun *description* (*faire une description*), which could explain the learner's lexical choice. Similarly, the expression *make abstraction of* (instead of *disregard*), illustrated in (7), is clearly a literal translation from French *faire abstraction de*. Of the 12 errors found in the corpus, 10 are potentially due to negative transfer (i.e. 83.3%). The remaining two errors, shown in (8) and (9), seem to be due to some intralingual factors. It is interesting to note, incidentally, that these two collocations are actually congruent in French and English (cf. *put an end* = *mettre fin*; *find a balance* = *trouver un équilibre*), which appears to confirm Nesselhauf's (2003b) point that errors can also be made with congruent collocations.

- (7) Instead of taking their human feelings into account, what you have to do in business is to try to solve a problem by means of figures, dollars, subsidies, profits... by counting, calculating and **making abstraction of** data of any other kind. [ICLE-FR]
☐ disregarding)
- (8) After a series of conflicts between France and Germany, the idea rose at **making an end** to them in order to maintain pacific relationships within Europe. [ICLE-FR]
☐ putting an end)
- (9) We have to **make a balance** between material comfort and pleasures and inner happiness, which, I think, can only be found in our mind, where everything starts. [ICLE-FR]
☐ find/strike a balance)

While the error analysis sheds some light on learners' knowledge of *make*-collocations, it relies on a small number of cases (although the corpus used is of reasonable size), which makes the conclusions somewhat tentative. Moreover, the relatively low error rate gives the impression that French-speaking learners have no major difficulties with *make*-collocations, which, as we will see later, is essentially a wrong impression.

4.2. Comparing the learner corpus data with the native corpus data

While a learner corpus is normally sufficient in itself to pinpoint the errors made by learners, it takes a control corpus of native language to highlight phenomena of overuse or underuse. Such phenomena are important, because they potentially indicate what learners feel confident about, and consequently use over and over again, and what they prefer to avoid.

Opinions diverge regarding the status of high-frequency verbs in learner language. Some linguists claim that learners tend to overuse such verbs (e.g. Källkvist 1998, Ringbom 1998), which one could explain by the fact that (i) learners have a more limited vocabulary and hence are more likely to rely on frequent verbs (saying things like *make a cake* or *get somebody at the airport*, rather than *bake a cake* or *pick somebody up at the airport*, for instance); and (ii) high-frequency verbs, because they display a wide range of meanings, are often a safe bet (they are, in Hasselgren's (1994) words, "lexical teddy bears", words learnt in the early stages which learners tend to cling to, even at an advanced level). Someone like Sinclair (1991: 79), on the other hand, asserts that "many learners avoid the common verbs as much as possible, and especially where they make up idiomatic phrases. Instead of using them, they rely on larger, rarer, and clumsier words which make their language sound stilted and awkward".

The analysis of the ICLE-FR data reveals that in the case of *make*, the tendency is towards underuse, rather than overuse, as appears from Table 3. Overall, the verb *make* is used significantly less often by French-speaking learners of English than by native speakers of English ($X^2 = 37.77$, $p < 0.001$), and the same is true of collocations with *make* ($X^2 = 13.95$,

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$p < 0.001$).¹² This underuse of collocations with *make* among French-speaking learners suggests that they are probably not so comfortable using such expressions and avoid them whenever they can. It also suggests that, were they to use as many *make*-collocations as native speakers, they might actually commit more errors than what the corpus reveals.

	LOCNESS-US		ICLE-FR	
	n	rel. freq.	n	rel. freq.
Occurrences of <i>make</i>	569	338.06	469	231.08
Occurrences of <i>make</i> -collocations	208	123.58	171	84.25

Table 3. Frequency of *make* and *make*-collocations in LOCNESS-US and ICLE-FR (absolute frequencies and relative frequencies per 100,000 words) (based on Borgatti 2006)

Not only do learners and native speakers differ in terms of the frequency with which they use *make*-collocations, but they also differ in the types of collocations they use.¹³ This can be shown by means of a collostructional analysis (Stefanowitsch & Gries 2003), a method which measures the association strength between a construction and the lexemes occurring in a given slot, in this case between the *make*-collocation and the noun occurring in it. More particularly, the so-called technique of distinctive collexeme analysis (see Gries & Stefanowitsch 2004), applied to the comparison of LOCNESS-US and ICLE-FR, makes it possible to determine the nouns that are more distinctive for one group or the other. Table 4 gives an overview of the results that are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). The figure between brackets corresponds to the distinctiveness value (log-transformed p -value). The higher this value, the more distinctive the noun is for the group of speakers.

LOCNESS-US	ICLE-FR
Decision (6.19)	Progress (4.00)
Argument (2.66)	Effort (3.56)
Claim (2.12)	Use (3.51)
Case (1.32)	Distinction (2.44)
Error (1.32)	Step (2.44)

Table 4. Most distinctive nouns in *make*-collocations (LOCNESS-US vs. ICLE-FR)

What is striking in these results is that the collocations that are distinctive for French-speaking learners (i.e. are overused by them) all have a word-for-word translation in French (e.g. *make progress* = *faire des progrès*, *make an effort* = *faire un effort*). Among the collocations that are distinctive for native speakers (i.e. are underused by learners), by contrast, only one has a direct equivalent in French, namely *make an error* (*faire une erreur*). The other collocations resort to a different light verb in French (e.g. *make a decision* = *prendre une décision*, literally “take”) or a different type of translation (e.g. *make an argument for* = *plaider en faveur de*, literally “plead for”). Some of these distinctive collocations are shown in context in (10) to (13).¹⁴

- (10) Words are not always useful to create links between people but the important matter is to **make an effort** to try to understand what others may think or feel. [ICLE-FR]
- (11) There are still good programmes, and television can always be a giant source of information, provided we are intelligent enough to **make a distinction** between fiction and reality. [ICLE-FR]
- (12) Another major **claim made** by the proponents of the adoptive families is that there may be an overall psychological effect on the children once they change homes. [LOCNESS-US]
- (13) On the other hand, Fumento **makes a very strong case** about the effectiveness of chasing down drivers who are not really a menace on the road, compared to the really drunken ones. [LOCNESS-US]

¹² This should not be taken as an indication that all high-frequency verbs are always underused by learners. Thus, the verbs *give* and *take* do not exhibit any significant difference in frequency between LOCNESS-US and ICLE-FR, and the verb *give* is slightly overused by Dutch learners, while *do* is slightly overused by German learners (corpus data from ICLE).

¹³ In fact, hardly more than 20% of the *make*-collocations found in the corpora are common to native speakers and learners.

¹⁴ Another difference between the collocations that are distinctive for native speakers and those that are distinctive for learners is that the former, but not the latter, include “speech” or “verbal communication” collocates (e.g. *argument*, *claim*), which confirms a point made by Altenberg & Granger (2001: 178).

Particularly interesting are the results for *decision* and *step*, shown in Table 5. Both nouns can be preceded in English by *make* or *take*, but with a difference in frequency. *Decision* is mostly used in combination with *make* (97.1% in LOCNESS-US),¹⁵ and *step* with *take* (100% in LOCNESS-US):¹⁶

- (14) After **this decision was made**, the number of black students attending schools with white students increased slowly but surely. [LOCNESS-US]
 (15) We need to seek disarmament and continue our technological progress in this direction while **taking practical steps** to reduce nuclear danger. [LOCNESS-US]

The learner data, however, exhibit opposite tendencies, with a majority of *take a decision* (69.2%) and *make a step* (60%):

- (16) To conclude we could say that towards the end Denis partly frees himself of his love obsession but he **takes the wrong decision**. [ICLE-FR]
 (17) **All the steps that are made** in order to reach that aim will first serve a European economic spirit. [ICLE-FR]

It is probably not a coincidence that these combinations have a literal translation in French, viz. *prendre une decision* and *faire un pas*, respectively.

	LOCNESS-US		ICLE-FR	
	n	%	n	%
<i>Make a decision</i>	33	97.1	4	30.8
<i>Take a decision</i>	1	2.9	9	69.2
<i>Take a step</i>	3	100	4	40
<i>Make a step</i>	0	0	6	60

Table 5. Frequency of *make/take a decision* and *take/make a step* in LOCNESS-US and ICLE-FR

Learners' preference for congruent collocations also becomes apparent if we adopt the method of reversed translation, translating the collocations found in ICLE-FR back into French. Borgatti (2006) found that over 90% of the *make*-collocations used by French-speaking learners have a direct equivalent in French. These results suggest that learners tend to use *make*-collocations which sound familiar to them because they correspond to a *faire*-collocation in French.¹⁷ Collocations which do not have such an equivalent, by contrast, are often avoided, which could explain the underuse of *make*-collocations discovered in the learner data.

4.3. Confronting the corpus data with the elicitation data

From what precedes, one could expect that the collocations which learners avoid are precisely those that they would have problems with, since they tend to be non-congruent. In order to test this hypothesis and, more generally, to gain a better understanding of learners' competence in terms of collocations, the results of the elicitation test were examined.

In the fill-in exercise, four sentences are of direct interest, as they should normally be completed with the verb *make*. The four collocations are *make a choice*, *make an offer*, *make a commitment* and *make one's escape*, as shown in Table 6. Overall, the error rate amounts to 51% (37 errors out of 76 answers) – which is to be compared with the 7% error rate established in the free production data. However, a distinction should be made between the first two collocations, which are completed correctly most of the time (95% and 84%, respectively), and the last two collocations, for which there are very few correct answers (16% and 0% respectively).¹⁸ The influence of the mother tongue is very clear here. While *make a choice* and *make an offer* correspond to a *faire*-collocation in French (*faire un choix*, *faire une offre*), this is not the case of *make a commitment* and *make one's escape*, whose translations into French require the verb *prendre* ("take"). Not surprisingly, many of the errors made by the learners in the two non-congruent collocations involve the use of the verb *take* (79% with *commitment* and 63% with *escape*). It seems, in other words,

¹⁵ This seems to be the case in British English too, though with a smaller proportion. Thus, the percentage of *make a decision* (as opposed to *take a decision*) in the BNC-Baby academic component (BNC Baby 2005) equals 82.6%.

¹⁶ It should be emphasised that this represents 3 instances only. In a bigger corpus such as the BNC-Baby academic component (one million words), the proportion of *take a step* amounts to 84.6%.

¹⁷ See Granger (1998b) for a similar remark about French-speaking learners' use of collocations with amplifying adverbs.

¹⁸ In order to be considered as correct, an answer not only had to be acceptable in English, but also had to correspond to the French translation. Thus, although *prepare one's escape* is perfectly acceptable, it does not translate the idea of "prendre la fuite".

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that learners tend to be guided by the translation of the collocation into their mother tongues when they are not familiar with an expression.

Question	Answer	n	%
She _____ the choice of never seeing her son again. = Elle fit le choix de ne plus jamais revoir son fils.	make do	18 1	95 5
They were not even given time to _____ an offer. = Ils n'ont même pas eu le temps de faire une offre.	make bid go give	16 1 1 1	84 5 5 5
He refused to _____ any kind of commitment. = Il refusa de prendre quelque engagement que ce soit.	take make Ø	15 3 1	79 16 5
As the thieves were _____ their escape, the owner ran out of the shop and started yelling. = Tandis que les voleurs prenaient la fuite, le propriétaire sortit du magasin en courant et se mit à crier.	take do prepare run Ø make	12 1 1 1 4 0	63 5 5 5 21 0

Table 6. *Make*-collocations in the fill-in exercise

For the evaluation exercise, the discussion will be limited to those sentences that were (correctly or incorrectly) presented in the test as including the verb *make*. The eight sentences are listed in Table 7, together with the French translation (not provided to the subjects) and, where applicable, the correct alternative. The figures in bold correspond to the correct answers. Overall, the error rate amounts to 43% (65 errors out of 152 answers), which is slightly lower than in the fill-in exercise, but still much higher than in the corpus data. Here again, however, the error rate varies from one sentence to the other. As a rule, it is with congruent collocations that the learners have the least difficulties. Thus, a majority of them recognised that *make a promise* (*faire une promesse*), *make a step* (*faire un pas*) and *make a gain* (*faire un gain*) are all acceptable and that *make an end* should be *put an end* (*mettre fin*). By contrast, most of them did not seem to have any problem with the incorrect collocations *make abstraction of*, which has a direct equivalent in French (*faire abstraction de*), and *make the difference between*, which corresponds to French *faire une différence entre*.¹⁹ The erroneous *make an experience* (in French, *faire une expérience*) was also accepted by a large proportion of the subjects (47%). The only exception to this rule is *make part of*, which corresponds to French *faire partie de*, but which 79% of the subjects were nevertheless able to identify as incorrect.

Question	Answer	n	%
The candidate had <u>made promises</u> to local groups of voters on behalf of the government. [Le candidat avait <u>fait des promesses</u> à des groupes locaux d'électeurs au nom du gouvernement.]	Y N	19 0	100 0
Countries now have a feeling that they <u>make part</u> of Europe. [Les pays ont maintenant le sentiment qu'ils <u>font partie</u> de l'Europe.] (□ are a part of/belong to)	Y N	4 15	21 79
All <u>steps made</u> towards unity will serve the economy of Europe. [Tous les <u>pas faits</u> vers l'unité serviront l'économie de l'Europe.]	Y N	13 6	68 32

¹⁹ This can be compared with the situation in ICLE-GE (German component of ICLE), where there is only one erroneous use of the collocation *make a difference* (see Nesselhauf 2003a: 282-283). Nesselhauf attributes this to the fact that German has two different collocations, *einen Unterschied machen* for "make a difference" and *eine Unterscheidung treffen* for "make a distinction", while French has only one collocation for both meanings, namely *faire une différence*.

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They wanted to <u>make an end</u> to these conflicts and maintain pacific relationships within Europe.	Y	6	32
[Ils voulaient <u>mettre fin</u> à ces conflits et maintenir des relations pacifiques en Europe.]	N	13	68
(□ put an end)			
The investor would have to <u>make a gain</u> of more than 25% on his new investment.	Y	11	58
[L'investisseur devrait <u>faire un gain</u> de plus de 25% sur son nouvel investissement.]	N	8	42
I <u>made several painful experiences</u> during my visits to the library.	Y	9	47
[J'ai <u>fait plusieurs expériences douloureuses</u> durant mes visites à la bibliothèque.]	N	10	53
(□ had several painful experiences)			
In business, one has to solve problems by counting, calculating and <u>making abstraction</u> of any emotional factors.	Y	13	68
[En affaires, il faut résoudre les problèmes en comptant, en calculant et en <u>faisant abstraction</u> de tout facteur émotionnel.]	N	6	32
(□ disregarding)			
Children are often unable to <u>make the difference</u> between fiction and reality.	Y	19	100
[Les enfants sont souvent incapables de <u>faire la différence</u> entre la fiction et la réalité.]	N	0	0
(□ make a distinction)			

Table 7. *Make*-collocations in the evaluation exercise

What precedes does not take into account the learners' ability to correct unacceptable collocations in the evaluation exercise. If we also consider those cases where the subject was unable, when necessary, to replace the incorrect collocation by an appropriate alternative, the error rate rises to 60% (91 errors out of 152). What this means is that, even if the learners detect an unacceptable collocation, they are not always able to correct it. *Make an experience*, for example, was rejected by 53% of the subjects, but only 10% identified *have* as the correct verb to be used with *experience*. The others did not correct the sentence or proposed another verb (e.g. *undergo*).

Finally, it can be enlightening to examine the degree of certainty assigned by the subjects to their answers. One pattern that emerges is that the degree of certainty tends to be higher for congruent collocations than for non-congruent collocations. In the fill-in exercise, congruent collocations reach an average degree of certainty of 2.05 (out of a maximum of 3), whereas with the non-congruent collocations, the average amounts to 0.95 only. In addition, the learners are sometimes blatantly wrong in assessing their answers. *Make the difference*, for example, which is (incorrectly) accepted by all the subjects, has an average score of 2.6, with 12 subjects assigning it the maximum degree of certainty. This is even higher than the score for *make a promise*, which is accepted with an average degree of certainty of 2.2. On the other hand, it is not rare to see the learners assign a low degree of certainty to a correct answer. The subjects who judged *make a gain* as acceptable, for instance, did it with an average degree of certainty of 1.3 only (including one guess). A correct answer in the elicitation test, therefore, does not guarantee that the learner fully masters the target collocation.

The results of the elicitation test provide a possible explanation both for the relatively low error rate and the underuse of *make*-collocations, and in particular non-congruent collocations, observed in the corpus data. Learners have great difficulty knowing what light verb should be used with a given noun. Since sense is of little help in this matter (the verb has very little semantic content of its own and the selection is mainly arbitrary), they tend to rely on what they know best, namely the corresponding collocation in their mother tongues, hence the importance of (positive and negative) transfer. As a rule, learners are more familiar with congruent collocations, as appears from the higher average degree of certainty. When writing free compositions, they seem particularly reluctant to take risks and tend to stick to those collocations which they feel safe with, that is, collocations which are congruent in their mother tongues. Not only does it result in few errors, since learners just have to translate the collocation word for word into the foreign language, but it also leads to underuse, since a whole set of collocations are avoided, namely those that are not congruent. Learners' use of collocations, in other words, appears to reflect two important strategies (see Howarth 1998a: 39-41), namely avoidance, when the learner avoids collocations that s/he is unfamiliar with (or unsure about), and positive transfer, when s/he successfully transfers collocations from his/her mother tongue to the foreign language. These two strategies conceal serious deficiencies in terms of collocational knowledge, which can only be revealed to their full extent by means of tests such as those found in Herbst (1996) or Granger (1998b) or the one conducted here, where competence, rather than performance, is investigated.

5. Some implications for FLT

It appears from the preceding section that advanced French-speaking learners' knowledge of collocations with *make* is far from being perfect, both from the point of view of performance and (even worse) competence. While, as pointed out by Hasselgren (1994), high-frequency verbs are taught early and become "lexical teddy bears" for learners, this knowledge tends to be rather

superficial, learners being essentially familiar with the core meanings of the verbs, but largely ignorant of their collocates. Since “competence in a language involves knowledge about collocation” (Herbst 1996: 389) and given that students, as a rule, do not “simply” acquire collocations but need explicit instruction to do so (Bahns & Eldaw 1993), it is necessary to develop learners’ knowledge of collocations with high-frequency verbs or, as Lennon (1996: 23) puts it, to “flesh out the incomplete or ‘skeleton’ entries which even advanced learners may have for high-frequency verbs”. The first step to this end is to raise learners’ awareness of the phraseological nature of high-frequency verbs (see De Cock & Granger 2004). The next step is to teach them a selection of collocations – since it is quite unrealistic to expect learners to master them all.

The selection of the collocations to be taught should be directed towards those collocations that are most likely to pose problems for the learner. In this respect, we saw that non-congruent collocations seem to be particularly difficult for learners, so that, as advocated by Bahns (1993), it would make sense to focus on such collocations and privilege, wherever possible, approaches that are specific to learners of a particular mother-tongue background. It would be wrong, however, to completely neglect those collocations that have a direct equivalent in the learner’s mother tongue for, as appears from the above analysis, such collocations may also be problematic for learners (see also Nesselhauf 2003b).

6. Conclusion

Thanks to the three-stage analysis presented in this article, it has been possible to gain some insight into advanced French-speaking learners’ knowledge of *make*-collocations. The examination of the learner corpus data for their own sake has revealed a relatively low error rate, but also clear evidence of transfer from the mother tongue. Compared with a control corpus of native English, the data have shown that the learners tend to underuse *make*-collocations, essentially limiting themselves to collocations which have a direct equivalent in their mother tongues. From the elicitation test, finally, it has emerged that the learners’ competence in terms of *make*-collocations leaves a lot to be desired – more, in fact, than a simple corpus analysis may suggest. In about half of the cases, the learners are not able to fill in the sentence with an appropriate verb, nor to judge the acceptability of a given collocation – let alone correct it when necessary. The results of the test also confirm the influence of the mother tongue on the use of collocations, both in the form of negative and positive transfer, and highlight the learners’ generally poor assessment of the correctness (or otherwise) of their answers.

More generally, this study has shown that an error analysis of learner corpus data only lifts a corner of the veil. Equally important are indications as to what learners get right, what they underuse and what they overuse (see Leech 1998: xvii). Moreover, next to performance, competence should also be considered, as the question, ultimately, is whether a particular linguistic phenomenon is already part of the learner’s mental lexicon or whether it has yet to be acquired. While to err is certainly human, it is not all. Errors may only be the tip of the iceberg, but when dealing with second and foreign language acquisition, one cannot afford to lose sight of the larger picture.

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