INVESTIGATING DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTER EFL IRAQI SECONDARY SCHOOL LEARNERS IN VERB-NOUN COLLOCATIONS

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دراسة استقصائية حول الصعوبات التي يواجهها طلاب المدارس الثانوية في العراق على مستوى التلازم اللفظي الفعلي-الاسمي

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INVESTIGATING DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTER EFL IRAQI SECONDARY SCHOOL LEARNERS IN VERB-NOUN COLLOCATIONS

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المستخلص

تعتبر المتلازمات اللغوية أحد المكونات المعجمية الأساسية في عملية تعليم وتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. يهدف البحث إلى استكشاف صعوبات المتلازمات اللغوية للفعل والاسم ومصادر صعوباتها بين طلاب المدارس الثانوية الدارسين اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. استخدمت طريقتان بحثيتان في الدراسة، طريقة الملاحظة الصفية، وطريقة المقابلات المركزة. تبنت الدراسة تصنيف الصعوبات الدلالية (أنواع الخطأ) من قبل (James 1998: 151-15) لتحليل البيانات. استخدم التحليل الموضوعي لجمع وتحليل البيانات. أظهرت النتائج أن المتعلمين واجهوا العديد من الصعوبات في إنتاجهم الشفهي (التحدث) في استخدام المتلازمات اللغوية للفعل والاسم. يعرض البحث بعض الاقتراحات التربوية لتعزيز بناء شبكة المفردات للمتعلمين. يعتبر البحث في اخطاء مصاحبات الفعل والاسم اللغوية مفيدًا حيث يمكن استخدامها لتحديد المشكلات ، ثم الخروج ببعض التوصيات التربوية التي يمكن أن تساعد المعلمين والطلاب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: متلازمات الفعل والاسم ومتعلموا الانكليزية بوصفها لغة اجنبية وطلاب الثانوية والصعوبات المعجمية ومصادر الصعوبات

Abstract

Collocations are considered as one of the essential lexical components in the EFL teaching and learning process. This paper intends to explore the verb-noun difficulties and sources of difficulties among Iraqi EFL secondary school students. Two qualitative research methods, classroom observation, and focus group interviews were employed in the study. The study adapted the semantic difficulties (error types) by (James 1998: 151-155) to analyze data. Thematic analysis was used to gather and analyze data. The results showed that these learners faced many difficulties in their oral production of using verb-noun collocations. This paper presents some pedagogical suggestions to enhance learners' collocational word net building. Investigating lexical errors of verb-noun collocations are considered to be beneficial since they can be used to identify problems, then to come up with some pedagogical recommendations that can help teachers and students.

Keywords: verb-noun collocations, EFL secondary school students, lexical difficulties, sources of difficulties

INTRODUCTION

It is very important to put new verb-noun combinations into practice. It has been acknowledged that collocations play an essential role in foreign language learning in that they enhance vocabulary knowledge and facilitates comprehension and the way to fluency (Nation, 2001, 2013, Wray 2000). Hence, having great knowledge of English collocations seems essential to use words and phrases in the appropriate context. Collocations are defined as two or more words that go together as single blocks or phrases. In a close definition, Nesselhauf (2005) showed that collocations are restricted lexeme combinations of a group of expressions such as a fully aware or make a decision, and confessed the importance of these combinations in language processing and use in recent years. In another definition, Schmitt (2000) sees collocations as sequential associations to the stimulus words which are made up of different word classes. For instance, collocations can be verb + noun collocations, such as: 'make a mistake' and 'do homework'. These definitions seem to be close

to each other; however, the one adopted here is based on Schmitt (2000) and Nesselhauf (2005) in that collocations are restricted lexeme of sequential associations to the stimulus word. Based on this definition, the study will pay attention to restricted collocations rather than open or free collocations.

Regarding the types of collocations, there are many types of collocations. According to Hausmann (1989:1010) collocations can be classified into several types: verb + noun (e.g. commit a crime), adjective-noun (e.g. excruciating pain), noun-verb (e.g. lions shout), adverb-adjective (e.g. completely satisfied), noun + noun: a surge of anger), verb + expression with a preposition (e.g. burst into tears), and verb-adverb (e.g. wave frantically). These various types of collocations give an indicator that learning the collocational properties is a daunting and big challenge to learners. Hence, many of the lexical and grammatical errors that learners make may relate to these types of collocations. It is difficult to acquire an extensive knowledge of collocations

(Franken, & Witten, 2010). From this perspective, it seems impossible to focus on all these types in one study. In particular, among these types of combinations, verb-noun collocations will be focused on in this study. Use verb-noun collocations seem to be challenging and confusing for learners. The previous research confirms that verb-noun collocation is the most challenging for learners to be acquired (Wei 1999, Boers, Demecheleer et al.2014, Mei-Hsing Tsai 2018). According to Boers, Demecheleer et al.(2014), acquisition of verb-noun collocations (e.g. make a bed) is particularly problematic for learners. Similarly, Mei-Hsing Tsai (2018) confirmed that collocated verbs, especially verb-noun collocations are difficult for learners to be mastered.

Moreover, it was observed that verb-noun collocations are among the most frequent and common types of word associations in the Iraqi curriculum. In deciding what to teach, it is important to consider the frequency of words, since the most frequently used

collocations are most likely formed by equally frequent lexical items' (Wei, 1999:8). For example, Iraq textbooks for English as a foreign language (EFL) contain exercises on various types of collocations, with a focus on verb-noun collocations (e.g. do homework, make a mistake). However, this type of collocation is not carefully delimited as compare with other grammar- based activities. As a result, Iraqi EFL students are facing problems in matching verb-noun collocations and lack the lexical knowledge to do verb-noun combinations without making erroneous connections.

To date, although the rise of collocations has brought a new dimension into vocabulary learning, little research has been done on verb-nun collocations in the Iraqi EFL context. Despite the importance of many types of prefabs, collocations are still not treated satisfactorily in English language teaching today (Nesselhauf, 2005). Therefore, studies on verb-noun collocation are needed to be explored to help EFL learners to deepen their

vocabulary knowledge. In addition, it has been suggested that to take into consideration the difficulties learners encounter with collocations when devising pedagogical measures for certain types of prefabs (ibid 2005).

Hence, this study is different as compared with previous research in Iraqi contexts in that it will narrow down exploring the lexical difficulties from broad sense into this type (verb-noun) collocation. In addition, it will focus on qualitative methods of collecting data. Hence, the current research aims to identify the difficulties of ELF Iraqi learners in the oral production of verb-noun collocation.

LEXICAL DIFFICULTIES

The previous research has been confirmed that lexical collocations including verb-noun collocations are a challenge to both ESL and EFL learners (Al-Zahrani, 1998, Mei-Hsing Tsai, 2018, Laufer and Waldman, 2011, Ridha and Al-Riyahi, 2011, Sabah 2017). In this vein, the following research confirms the

importance of verb-noun collocations and their vital role in enhancing learners' proficiency.

For example, Al-Zahrani (1998) investigated the collocational knowledge of 81 Arabic-speaking learners and found a strong relationship between knowledge of verb-noun collocations and students' proficiency. In addition, he showed these learners made verb-noun erroneous connections in the blank-filling verb-noun collocations test. In the same vein, Mei-Hsing Tsai (2018) investigated the effect of concept-based instruction and form-focused instruction of 41 Taiwanese English majors and non-English major's learners on collocations and found that both concept-based instruction and form-focused instruction had a positive effect on enhancing verb–noun collocations in both acquisition and retention, but concept-based instruction showed a deeper understanding of verb–noun collocations.

Regarding identifying the difficulty of verb-noun collocations and sources of these difficulties, Laufer and Waldman (2011) found that native speakers of Hebrew produced far fewer verb–noun collocations than native speakers of English, and their errors were interlingual ones. Similar to Hebrew, Shehata (2008), Hama (2010) and Ridha and Al-Riyahi (2011) found that the negative transfer from Arabic (interlingual) represents a big challenge to Iraqi EFL students.

Other studies identified the lexical errors, for example, Ilmiani, Solichin et al. (2021) investigated the errors of recount composition based on four types of error (Omission, Misordering, Misformation, and addition) adapted from (James's 1998) taxonomy. The result showed that misformation (35.25%) was the most frequent error type, followed by omission (28.96%), Misordering (25, 96 %.), and finally addition (9, 84%). In the Iraqi context, among seven types of collocations, Ridha and Al-Riyahi (2011) found that Iraqi EFL students made the

most frequent errors in verb- noun collocations (33, 76 %), followed by adjective-noun errors (24, 84 %), then noun-verb (22, 29%). While the other four types accounted for the percentages as follows: noun-noun (6, 37%), adverb-adjective (3, 18%), verb-adverb (3 ,82%), and noun-noun (5, 73%).

In another study which is not very copious current and previous research, but it has some similarities with the current research in some perspectives, Putra and Suhardijanto (2019) explored Indonesian learners' production of verb-noun collocations. They found that there were 21.5% errors in collocations, 56% from the wrong choice of verbs, 32% from grammatical errors, and 12% from the wrong choice of nouns.

From the review of studies presented above, we conclude that collocation is an important productive aspect of proficiency; therefore, it is important to know the way in which words are combined together to avoid errors. These studies indicated that a

674 **|** العدد السابع والعشرون

lexical difficulty represents a problematic and challenging issue among ESL and EFL learners and the lexical errors are not accidental or random. Lexical errors "respond to systematic causes that can be accounted for in the analysis of the language sample" (LIach, 2011:74). Hence, the current study attempts at finding these causes and present a better explanation for the lexical errors encountered by Iraqi EFL learners.

To sum up, as compared with the past studies, two types of lexical errors as classified by James (1998) which belong to semantic errors in lexis will be focused rather than focus on form. This study is similar to Putra and Suhardijanto in that both are focused on the oral production of verb-noun collocations, but they are different in methods of collecting data and analysis methods. These studies pay attention to the oral production of verb-noun collocations rather than written language as shown by most of the previous research. Therefore, oral production data analysis still rarely gets researchers' interests. Therefore, the

current study attempt to fill a gap in the oral productive of verb-noun collocations and focus on verb-noun collocations as a separate type, additionally, qualitative data analysis will be used rather than quantitative ones.

ERRORS TAXONOMY

As shown in the above mentioned previous research, errors are classified under many types such as misformation, paraphrase, collocations, derivational errors, confusion of semantically similar words, and verb confusion. Carrio´ Pastor 2004 in LIach, 2011:77) classified errors into six types as follows: 1) Formal errors which derive from the confusion of two similar words, 2) Wrong word formation, which includes: word invention, borrowing from the L1, relexification or adaptation of an L1 word into the grammatical conventions (orthographic, phonetic and morphologic) of the L2, and linguistic calque. 3) Lexical distortions because of the following: omission, addition) ,wrong ordering of letters within the word, and wrong choice of two

العدد السابع والعشرون | 676

similar words, 4) use of base words (hyponym) instead of superonym (more specific word), 5) Collocational errors, 6) Wrong lexical choice because of semantic relatedness.

In another important classification, James (1998) shows the distinction between form-and content-oriented lexical errors as shown in the following figure:
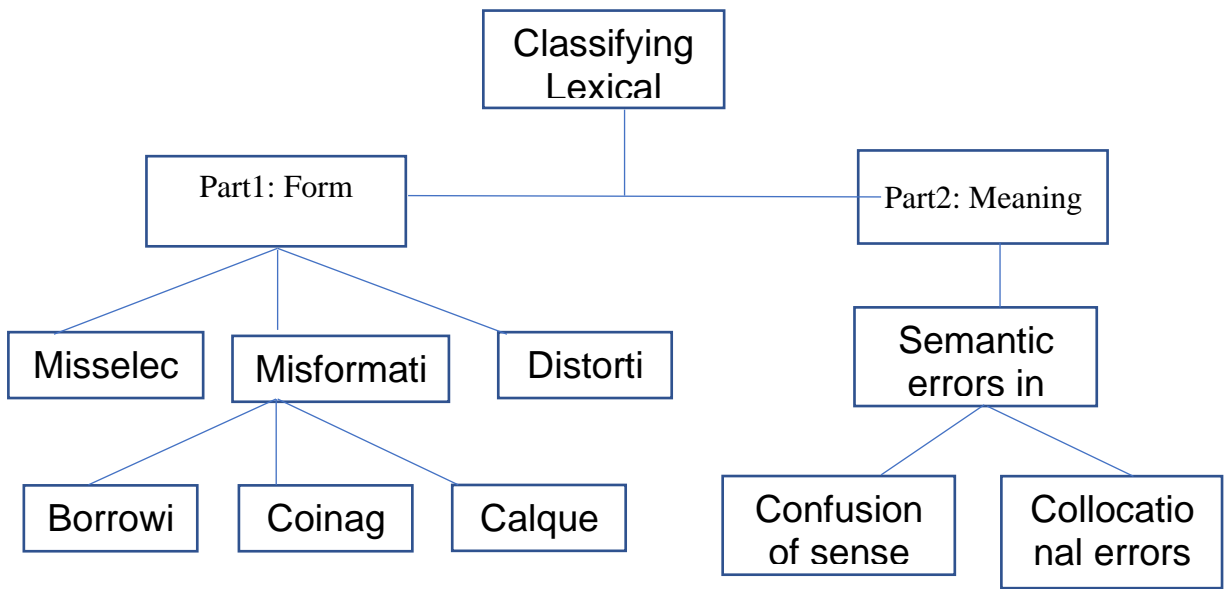

Figure 1: Classifying Lexical errors in James (1998: 142154)

Figure 1 is considered as an essential source for this research, and thus, lexical errors are classified and presented in light of this figure. As part two shows, this study adapted the meaning-oriented lexical errors taxonomy (Semantic errors in lexis). In other words, the current study focuses on the two types of lexical/semantic difficulty as classifies by James (1998). These types are shown as follows: 1) Confusion of sense relations and (confusion of sense relations because of semantic relatedness) and 2) Collocational errors (result from the association of two words which in native usage do not go together).

AIMS OF THE STUDY

The present study aims to identify the difficulties of ELF Iraqi learners in the production of verb-noun collocations. In addition, it attempts to identify the factors that contribute to the difficulty of (certain) collocations.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the difficulties encountered by EFL Iraqi learners in verb-noun collocations?

2. What are the sources of difficulties encountered by these learners in verb-noun collocations?

THE STUDY

PARTICIPANTS

27 fifth-year students, from the Iraqi school in Malaysia, have participated in the study. All these students were observed during the lessons focusing on verb-noun collocations. 12 of them have been selected randomly to participate in an interview. They have been taught English for approximately 9 years. They were similar in age, rating from 17-19 years.

INSTRUMENTS

To achieve the objectives of this study, data was collected and analyzed using qualitative methods. A total of 12 subjects at the Iraqi school in Malaysia were interviewed in this study. These students were interviewed about the difficulties encountered when learning verb-noun collocations which are already provided in their secondary school textbooks. The study focused on the oral production of verb-noun collocations in common delexicalised verbs (empty verbs) such as do, make take, and have as being the most frequent verb-noun combinations. The study bases its data analysis on the taxonomy of the semantic error types by James (James 1998: 151-155). Data were categorized into two main themes: difficulties in verb-noun collocations and sources of difficulties in verb-noun collocation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results report and discuss the difficulties faced by Iraqi EFL learners in verb-noun collocations. In particular, classroom observation and an interview were used to find out about the difficulties encountered by these learners when learning their verb-noun collocations which are already provided in their textbooks.

DIFFICULTIES IN VERB-NOUN COLLOCATIONS

The results showed that Iraqi learners' faced many difficulties in their use of verb-noun collocations. As a consequence of these difficulties, the learners produced unsatisfactory verb-noun-collocations. This finding is in line with a lot of previous qualitative research. For example, as compared with other types of collocations, Ridha and Al-Riyahi (2011) showed that Iraqi EFL students made the most frequent lexical errors in verb+ noun collocations (33, 76 %). Similarly, Al-Zahrani (1998) showed that Saudi Arabia learners made verb-noun erroneous

connections in their test. In some respects, learners' responses resemble each other in that all of the subjects reported that verb-noun collocation is a laborious and daunting task. The participants reported about their verb-noun collocations' difficulties as follows:

Int.2

<div dir="rtl">

"ما عندي تفصيل عن بقية الانواع، لكن اشوف الفيرب ناون

(الفعل والاسم) صعب كلش لان اواجه صعوبة بربطهن من

اكتب او اتكلم".

</div>

Translation:

(I do not have a detail about the other types of collocations, but the verb-noun is too difficult. I found it is difficult to combine them (verb and noun) in writing or speaking).

<div dir="rtl">

682 **|** العدد السابع والعشرون

</div>

Int.6

"انا اتردد من اريد استخدم الكلمات بجمل لان اواجه صعوبة

شون اربط الكلمات وي الكلمات الاخرى ، ما اكو قاعدة

محددة نستخدمها حتى نربط الافعال وي الاسماء".

Translation:

(I hesitate to use words in a sentence because I

don't know how to combines words. There is

no certain rule to be used to combine verbs

with nouns).

Int. 8

"ما عندي فكره واضحة عن الاسم وما جنت اعرف يسمون

ترابط الفعل بالاسم متلازمات ، الفعل والاسم ، ما درسونا عليها

المدرسين بالتفصيل ، ندرسها حالها حال اي تمرين كلمات بدون

ميفصلون".

(I don't have a clear idea about the name

(collocation). I don't know combining a verb

with a noun called verb-noun collocations.

Teachers didn't instruct us about collocation;

they teach us collocation as a vocabulary exercise without details).

As a result of this difficulty, these participants produced infelicitous verb-noun collocations. For example, interviewee 3 reported:

(نفس الشي وما استطيع اميز بيناتهم بسهولة". (make and do" اني هواي اخبط بين ميك ودو).

Translation:

(I'm always confused in using make and do since they are deemed to be the same (synonyms), thus I cannot recognize them easily).

Int. 3

<div dir="rtl">

اكيد راح اكول هو سوه جريمه او عمل جريمة وهاي نستخدم

هذا العبير بحجينا يوميا فننقلها للانكليزي ، دائما فكر بالعربي

"واترجمه انكليزي".

</div>

Translation:

(Of course, I will say he did a crime or made a crime. We use this expression in our daily talk, thus we transfer it to English. I always think in Arabic and translate it into English).

Additionally, the learners were observed to be perplexed to choose the proper verb-noun collocations. For example, they were observed to be confused when they asked to collocate did or made mistake in the sentence **"I ….. a lot of mistakes in the test"**. Several subjects used did instead of made and one subject used the correct verb made and justifies his use as a guessing method, while, another subject justified their use of made as a transfer method from their native language. An explanation for

these learners' confusion regarding the use of <u>make</u> instead of <u>do</u> or vice versa may be because make and do have the same Arabic Iraqi colloquial equivalent, therefore they use them interchangeably as synonyms.

Moreover, these subjects were observed to produce other infelicitous collocations. For example, when they asked to collocate "<u>do/make or write</u>" with "<u>homework</u>", they used "<u>make or write homework but not do homework</u>". Some of these subjects used the verb "<u>solve homework</u>" (to mean they find an answer to homework). This indicates that they do not have an idea about the verb-noun collocation "<u>solve a problem/puzzle but not solve homework</u>". This indicates that these subjects resort to their native language when they answer or use these collocations. It is obvious that these students translate the literal meaning of "<u>solve</u>" "يحل" in a very common sentence in Arabic like (الحرب ما تحل مشكلة War never solves anything), and they transfer it into English. In Arabic, the word <u>solve</u> can be collocated with a

problem (social and mathematics) and also with homework. Therefore, it seems very important to do a lot of research on the similarities between English and Arabic equivalents.

The subjects' extracts above show the improper use of verb-noun collocations. These extracts show that these difficulties are attributed to subjects' inadequate collocational knowledge and insufficient classroom instruction on verb-noun collocations. Al-Zahrani (1998) find out those Arabic-speaking learners have a shortage of collocational knowledge and attributed their errors to overgeneralization.

In other words, these subjects seem to be not aware of verb-noun collocations in that they lack the collocational knowledge to help them know how verbs collocate with their nouns. Some of these subjects emphasize that there is no specific rule govern their use of verb-noun collocations, thus why they were perplexed. For example, Int. 10 said:

"ما عندي اي ستراتيجية او قاعدة في معرفة متلازمة

الفعل والاسم ودائما الجا للحفظ على القلب بدون قاعدة"

Translation:

(I don't have any strategy or rule in knowing the verb-noun collocations. I always resort to memorizing words by heart (rote learning)".

Another reason for the above-mentioned difficulty of verb-noun collocations shows that Iraqi EFL students make collocational semantic errors and sense relations errors (e.g. confusion synonyms or a near-synonym as a strategy of lexical simplification). For example, the misuse of verb synonyms is highlighted as another source of learners' difficulties. They produced wrong collocations such as; say or speak a lie instead of tell a lie, say or speak a story instead of tell a story. Similarly, do a mistake instead of make a mistake, and make a crime instead of commit a crime,

Int. 11 said:

"لا، "tell" ما ترهم بينما "speak" او say" ترهم وي هاي الاسماء".

اعتقد

Translation:

> (No, I think tell is not suitable (to collocate
>
> with a story), while speak and say seems
>
> suitable).

SOURCES OF DIFFICULTIES

As regards the sources of verb-noun collocational errors,

Brown (2000) classified errors into two kinds: interlingual

errors (interference by native language) and intralingual

errors (misuse of a partial rule of the target language).

According to Farghal and Obiedat (1995), a negative

transfer happened when the target collocations have no

similar patterns in the native language. As the above

examples show, these subjects' errors can be attributed

mostly to the negative transfer of Arabic. This strategy

seems to be the most reliant strategy adopted by these

learners. The subjects reported they are " think in Arabic and translate (transfer) into English. Additionally, based on the observation method, they were observed to be heavily reliant on their native language in their use of verb-noun collocations. This result is in line with researchers such as (Shehata, 2008, Laufer and Waldman, 2011, Hama, 2010 and Ridha and Al-Riyahi, 2011).

These learners' wrong choice of verbs and their reliance on their native language may be attributed to these subjects' lack of exposure to English, i.e. they have no opportunities to encounter the English language in their daily life situations. According to Int. 4:

"درسنا المتلازمات حتى نعبر بالامتحان، ماكو اي فرصة نستخدم الانكليزي خارج الصف، هاي تعتبر مشكلة تواجهنا بتحسن مفرداتنا".

Translation:

(We taught collocations to pass the exam. There

is no chance for exposure to English outside the

classroom. This is considered a problem in

enhancing our vocabulary).

On the other hand, it was found that there is a positive influence

or transfer from Arabic. The positive transfer often contributes to

better production of verb-noun collocation, for example, all the

subjects collocated take with photo correctly. They said, "take a

photo" but not do or make a photo. This indicated that these

subjects were able to collocate take with photo without facing

any difficulty because of the positive influence of their native

language. According to Farghal and Obiedat (1995), a positive

influence happened when the target collocations matched those in

the native language; however, the one-to-one correspondence

hypothesis does not always result in positive influence because it

happens in only a few cases.

691 | مجلة مداد الآداب

"فعلا وجدت ان جمع الفعل والاسم مهم وحسيت اذا

اطبق هذا الشي راح يطور كلامي وكتابتي بالانكليزي،

كنت اصور مخطئ تعلم المفردات هو حفظ اكبر عدد

من الكلمات"

Translation:

I found that the verb-noun collocations are important, and I felt that if I rely on this thing (method), it would improve my speaking and writing in English. I thought wrongly that learning vocabulary was just a matter of memorizing the largest number of words.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In conclusion, the results indicated that Iraqi EFL learners face serious difficulties in their oral production of verb-noun collocations. They pointed out their lack of collocational awareness in general and verb-noun collocations in particular. Additionally, the results showed that the discussed above verb-

العدد السابع والعشرون **|** 692

nouns errors are mainly attributed to the negative influence or transfer from Arabic. Reliance on the native language is found to be the most outstanding strategy used by these learners. These results suggest that learners need to know some instructions regarding the use of verb-noun collocation with a focus on interactive collocational activities, thus teachers should pay much more attention to the differences among related verb-noun collocations in the classroom. Hence, collocational knowledge is essential for EFL learners, and collocation instruction in EFL courses is required. It suggests that emphasis should be paid to treat each type of collocations separately. Additionally, it is highly required to devise definite test to measure learner's verb-noun collocational knowledge.

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