



## ANALYSIS OF COLLOCATIONS IN ENGLISH SONG LYRICS AND THEIR BOSNIAN TRANSLATION EQUIVALENTS: POTENTIAL FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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### Abstract:

The use of music in the process of English language teaching and learning is a well-established practice. In fact, the use of authentic, contemporary language examples from popular songs has been proposed by many (Murphey, 1990; Lopez-Sanz, 2013; Kerekes, 2015) as a tool to enhance learners' collocational competence, contextual understanding, and overall linguistic proficiency in English. This research aims to examine the frequency and types of collocations in a selection of song lyrics, to analyse their translation equivalents, and, by doing so, to explore the pedagogical potential of lexical collocations in song lyrics for practical applications in the process of teaching and learning English. Utilizing a corpus of 195 songs by Taylor Alison Swift, the analysis involves a comparison of lexical collocations in English and their translation equivalents in Bosnian. The findings reveal that apart from the relatively high frequency of lexical collocations, there are also certain patterns that can be observed, such as the consistent preference for adjective-noun pairings across and the total absence of adverb-verb combinations. From a contrastive perspective, the finding is that many collocations change in form and complexity during translation with a certain number of English examples losing their collocational patterns when translated to Bosnian. Such differences can make learning English collocations more challenging and demanding. However, this research underscores the value of integrating popular music into language curricula, advocating for innovative, engaging approaches to teaching English, in particular for Bosnian EFL learners, through modern, more relatable content.

**Keywords:** lexical collocations, frequency, Bosnian, translation, lyrics

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## 1. Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge represents a core component of foreign language learning. The understanding of vocabulary items stored in our mental lexicon, first and foremost, calls for knowledge of their form and meaning. However, in order to fully understand a particular word, we also need to be familiar with a number of its additional characteristics, such as *“the words commonly associated with it (its collocations) as well as its connotations, including its register and its cultural accretions”* (Thornbury, 2002, p. 15). Moreover, Nation (2013) includes grammatical functions, collocations and constraints on the use of particular words as individual steps towards full receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, collocational knowledge appears as an integral part of the vocabulary learning process. In addition, while vocabulary learning can be intentional and accidental (Loewen, 2015), it is always done through target language input, and one of the main ways of input is through listening.

Listening in its natural contexts is often associated with listening of songs. Songs have been recognized as helpful in the development of various language skills, in particular listening, and overall English language fluency (Pavia *et al.*, 2019; Lopez-Sanz, 2013). Songs share a lot of features, for example, rhythm and tempo, with oral language and their lyrical repetitiveness is an incredibly helpful feature (Abbott, 2002) for the vocabulary learning process, along with the fact that certain language learners may feel more musically inclined, such as the learners that have highly developed musical intelligence according to Gardner’s (1985) multiple intelligences theory. In addition, positive effects on affective and social factors have also been recognized as music has been said to foster motivation and self-confidence along with students’ participation (Lems, 2018; Lopez-Sanz, 2013). Similarly, Murphey (1992) lists most of the aforementioned song features as beneficial for the language and, more specifically, the vocabulary learning process, including their shortness, simplicity and repetitiveness. Kerekes (2015) claims that it is precisely the songs that are useful for vocabulary teaching and learning, whereas Lynch (2005) adds grammar as well. Tegge (2015) stresses that language teachers have shown great enthusiasm for the use of popular songs in English language teaching and that there is a plethora of research to confirm this continuous interest over the years (Tegge, 2015).

Considering the potential of song listening in foreign language teaching and learning, the studies on the language of popular songs in English have remained relatively sparse. Moreover, in the context of English speakers whose mother tongue is Bosnian, such studies remain even further limited in number. Tegge (2015) cautions of the general lack of research within this domain, emphasizing that, in general, *“an understanding of the lexical load of authentic teaching material is critical”* (Tegge, 2015, p. 3). In terms of the existing research studies, one of the earliest analysis focusing on songs from a pedagogical perspective is that by Murphey (1990), who compiled and analyzed a corpus of pop songs and concluded that as a genre, pop songs are short, lexically simple, and very repetitive. Kreyer and Mukherjee (2007) also compiled a corpus called the

Giessen-Bonn Corpus of Popular Music (GBoP) and focused their analysis of grammatical and lexical features of songs' lyrics on the comparison to other spoken and written corpora concluding that songs share characteristics of both. A study by Tilwani and others (Tilwani, *et al.*, 2022) centered on incidental vocabulary learning through the use of songs, with a particular focus on form-meaning connection, spoken form recognition, and collocation recognition, and it revealed the beneficial effects of listening to songs on all these areas concluding that perhaps, in the context of collocation recognition, it is precisely the songs that *"might have made the collocations more salient due to the fact that they put emphasis on stresses and rhythms"* (Tilwani *et al.*, 2022).

### 1.1 Collocations

Collocations are recognized as *"a ubiquitous linguistic phenomenon"* that *"has proven to be extremely elusive"* (Schmid, 2003, p. 238). Schmid (2003) includes the following criteria for the identification of collocations: they must consist of two or more words, they need to be adjacent, and they need to be recurrent word combinations rather than combinations occurring by pure chance (Schmid, 2003, p. 239). Of course, these rules result in further, more detailed and specific requirements in order to meet each of the aforementioned criteria. To exemplify, concerning the adjacency criterion, it is necessary to determine just how many words left or right of the node word are to be included, or, regarding the frequency criterion, it is important to establish a threshold for the inclusion of collocations in the analysis. This is one of the problems with such analyses because even though the notion of mutual expectancy, as introduced by Firth (1957), helps with the understanding of predictability and the words that seem to expect each other, it is important to stress that these notions are also at the same time *"highly subjective and of little reliability"* (Schmid, 2003, p. 243).

Furthermore, various scholars present differing definitions and explanations of lexical collocations. Bahns (1993) emphasizes that to achieve a clearer comprehension of lexical collocations, it is beneficial to distinguish them from idioms on one side and from free combinations on the other. Chiekezie (2021) posits that lexical collocations are intricately woven within a language. Chiekezie, drawing from Benson (1990), defines collocations as the occurrence of two or more words within short proximity of each other. Moreover, Benson, Benson, and Ilson (1986) describe collocations as specific, identifiable, non-idiomatic recurrent combinations. Consequently, Benson (1989) advocates for referring to lexical collocations as arbitrary recurrent word combinations. This is why Gablasova (2017) warns that, on the whole, interpreting the results of various research studies is quite challenging due to the conflicting terminology, selection criteria, etc. (Gablasova, *et al.*, 2017). In general, collocations are categorized into two types: lexical and grammatical. According to Gulec and Gulec (2015), lexical collocations involve combinations of two open-class words, such as a verb and noun or an adjective and noun. In contrast, grammatical collocations consist of one open class word and one closed class word, including structures like a noun, adjective, or verb combined with a particle (e.g., a preposition, adverb, or grammatical construct like an infinitive, gerund, or clause).

Similarly, Benson, Benson and Ilson (1986), in their introduction to *The BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English Grammatical Collocations*, also classify collocations into these two categories.

Having defined what lexical collocations are, it is important to mention that they can be further categorized into a number of distinct categories, and that they differentiate across languages. In relation to classification, a common classification system, as cited in Benson, Benson and Ilson (1997), results in six categories, to which lexical collocations can be assigned. Those categories include the following combinations: *Verb + Noun*, *Adjective + Noun*, *Noun + Verb*, *Noun1 + Noun2*, *Adverb + Adjective*, *Verb + Adverb*, and some linguists add additional categories as well such as *Adverb + Verb* (Chiekezie, 2021).

Despite consisting of multiple lexical words, which are a part of highly numerous word classes, lexical collocations are not widely spread across dictionaries (Benson, 1990). This is somewhat surprising since lexical collocations of a language might be a strong stepping stone for a non-native individual attempting to master the language. For example, McArthur (1992, p. 232) emphasizes the inability to correctly use collocations as “*a major indicator of foreignness*”. Others have tackled the issue of nativeness and non-nativeness in terms of collocation use in different genres, such as writing for example (Demir, 2017). Additionally, Cheriguene *et al.* (2020) suggest a contrastive approach in teaching collocations as an effective way of reducing lexical errors. Unfortunately, when it comes to the Bosnian language, the status of lexical collocations is not as clear-cut as in the English language. Collocations, in general, are very hard to identify in the Bosnian language due to a lack of sufficient and ample research on the topic, as well as an ostensible lack of interest in such word combinations. One of the noteworthy examples of the focus on collocations from a contrastive standpoint is that by Riđanović (2007), who offers some examples of different uses of collocations between English and B/C/S. Therefore, the contrastive component of this research is equally important as the few existing studies comparing native and non-native language speakers in terms of collocation use resulted in noticeable differences between these two categories (Rizvić-Eminović & Arnaut-Karović, 2015; Arnaut-Karović & Rizvić-Eminović, 2015).

In conclusion, even though lexical collocations have been researched, to a certain extent, from the perspective of general-purpose dictionaries and the nativeness and non-nativeness of a speaker, the situation may differ when it comes to song lyrics. Consequently, the main aim of this research paper is to conduct a frequency analysis of collocations and collocational patterns in the target corpus, in combination with contrastive analysis, as an attempt to delve deeper into this field and its possible pedagogical implications in the context of Bosnian EFL learners.

The research questions include the following:

- 1) Considering the role and potential of songs in English language teaching (Lems, 2005; Engh, 2013), do popular songs contain a relatively sufficient and adequate number of collocations for practical use in EFL classrooms?
- 2) Does the corpus contain different collocational patterns which could potentially be used in EFL classrooms?

- 3) Noting the use of a contrastive approach in teaching collocations (Bahns, 1993; Nesselhauf, 2003; 2005), what degree of collocational congruency does this corpus show? If there is a significant incongruency between original collocations and their translation equivalents, is it truly beneficial to use contrasting for Bosnian EFL learners?

## 2. Material and methods

The corpus for this research is based on song lyrics from Taylor Alison Swift – a globally popular contemporary American country/pop singer, performer, and songwriter, as the existing research states that meaningful songs that allow students to empathize and identify with are particularly suitable for language learning (Saricoba & Metin, 2000; Sobrino Martin, 2017). The language of Swift's songs has already been analyzed with a focus on figurative language and metaphors (Lusiana & Qomariana, 2017; Setiawati & Maryani, 2018; Liao, 2020) but not in terms of collocations, even more notably so with a contrastive approach and a focus on their pedagogical implications. For this research a descriptive approach based on frequency was used (Evert, 2008) as one of the common approaches used in corpus linguistics (McEnery and Hardie, 2011; Gablasova *et al.*, 2017). The final number of one hundred and ninety-five songs (a total of 71,748 words) was drawn from all ten albums by Taylor Alison Swift, which include: *Taylor Swift – Debut, Fearless, Speak Now, Red, 1989, Reputation, Lover, Folklore, Evermore* and *Midnights*. Albums vary in regards to the number of songs, and some songs were skipped in the cases of remixes, remastered versions, or sometimes even collaborations. The analysis focusing on the Bosnian segment relies on the aforementioned criteria applied for English since there is no corpus in the Bosnian language to help determine whether a collocation in English is a collocation in the Bosnian language as well. The analysis process of one hundred and ninety-five songs by Taylor Alison Swift included manually checking every lexical word, individually, through available dictionaries, to determine whether that word and its neighboring word constitute a collocation. Every lexical word was manually searched through the dictionaries of BBI and Oxford, as well as the Corpus of Contemporary American English. Following this analysis, two hundred and sixty-two examples of lexical collocations have been noted down, with some examples repeating throughout multiple songs and albums. To illustrate, the example “*high heels*” repeats multiple times throughout the albums, but it is entered into the table only once.

## 3. Results and discussion

The results are presented in the form of charts and tables for an easier overview and analysis. The first section begins with the analysis of frequency and types of collocations across all the albums, proceeds to include the analysis of the frequency and complexity of the translated equivalents of lexical collocations in Bosnian, and, lastly, finishes with the examples of such translation equivalents between the two languages.

### 3.1 Frequency of collocations and collocational patterns

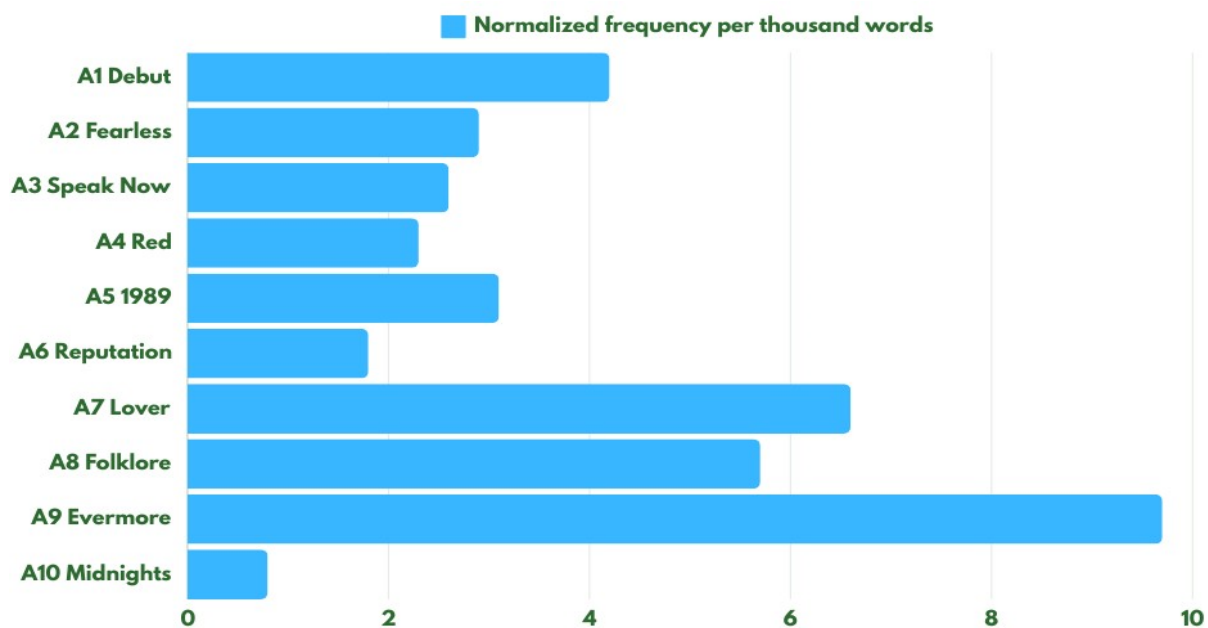
This segment provides an insight into the general frequency of occurrence of lexical collocations within the song lyrics by Taylor Alison Swift, along with the analysis of the present collocational patterns. Considering that the total word count in the corpus is 71,748 words and that lexical collocations consist of two words, the non-recurring collocations in this corpus present 0,73% of all the words in the corpus. Table 1 shows the frequency count of lexical collocations across all ten albums.

**Table 1:** Frequency of collocations based on collocational types

Collocational pattern	Adj + N	V+N	N+V	Adv+Adj	V+Adv	Adv+V	N1+N2	Total
Frequency count	165	24	13	3	4	0	53	262

It can be concluded that the most frequent type of lexical collocations is that of *Adj + N*, and the type that does not occur at all is *Adv + V*. Some examples of different collocational types include as follows: *Adj + N* (e.g. *dark clouds, flashing lights*), *V + N* (e.g. *make mistakes, keep secrets*), *N + V* (*rumors fly, shoe fits*), *Adv + Adj* (e.g. *terribly wrong, perfectly fine*), *V + Adv* (*shine bright, run fast*), *N1 + N2* (e.g. *passenger seat, pirate ship*).

In Table 2, each of the albums is presented individually, along with the normalized frequency of collocations per thousand words. From Table 2, it can be deduced that lexical collocations are the most frequently employed in the album *Evermore* (A9), followed by *Lover* (A7), and then *Folklore* (A8). Albums are marked chronologically from A1 (*Debut*) to A10 (*Midnights*). The total number of extracted collocations is 262. Considering the frequency and the variety of collocational types, it seems entirely feasible to use the song lyrics to suit the needs of EFL learners of particular CEFR (Central European Framework) levels.



**Table 2:** Normalized frequency of collocations per thousand words

### 3.2 Contrastive analysis of collocations and their translation equivalents

This section focuses on analysing the Bosnian translation equivalents of the English lexical collocations identified in the songs. To respond to the research question regarding the necessity of using contrastive analysis when teaching English collocations to Bosnian EFL learners, it was first determined whether the translation equivalent was a collocation in the Bosnian language. Then, the lexical complexity of those translation equivalents was analysed to establish the degree of congruency in their form in the two languages. Finally, the semantic congruency of the translation equivalents was analysed to establish the potential for a negative transfer error and, consequently, the need to use contrastive analysis in teaching lexical collocations.

There are two hundred and sixty-two examples of lexical collocations in total in the English version. Out of the total number of examples, two hundred and thirty-seven are lexical collocations in the Bosnian language as well, while only twenty-five (9.54%) are not, which on its own might indicate the need to use the contrastive analysis when teaching collocations.

**Table 3:** Bosnian translation equivalents of English lexical collocations in the corpus

Translation equivalent	No.	Examples
Collocation in Bosnian	237	rainy day – crni dani golden age – zlatno doba love story – ljubavna priča
Not a collocation in Bosnian	25	crescent moon – polumjesec stepping stone – stepenica blue jeans – plave traperice

As Table 4 indicates, the twenty-five translation equivalents that are not lexical collocations in the Bosnian language can be further classified into one-word equivalents and equivalents consisting of three or more words.

**Table 4:** Representation of the number of words used in the translation equivalent

Number of words in translation equivalents	Frequency count	Examples
One word	21	antikvarnica; volan
Three or more words	4	rupe od metaka; auto za bijeg

The examples presented in Table 4 above, when translated, are not recognized as lexical collocations as they no longer satisfy the aforementioned criteria. The reason for this is that they either behave as grammatical collocations or clauses in Bosnian, due to the types of words occurring in the translation equivalent in combination with their lexical components, or their translation equivalent is only one word.

Significantly, among the translation equivalents, there are 23 examples (8.8%), containing lexemes in Bosnian which cannot be regarded as translation equivalents of individual words in the English collocation or have different collocational patterns in Bosnian. Such examples of semantic incongruency include the following:

**Table 4:** Examples of semantically incongruent collocations

Collocation	Translation equivalent	Literal translation
the last straw	kap koja je prelila čašu	*posljednja slamka
lose sleep	ne spavati	*gubiti san
rumours fly	glasine se brzo šire	glasine *lete
mascara running (down the face)	maskara se razmazala (po licu)	maskara *teče niz lice
go terribly wrong	poći naopako	poći *grozno loše

Since they contain semantically incongruent equivalents, which is indicated by the literal translation equivalents in Table 5 above, examples such as those above would be problematic to Bosnian EFL learners and they might potentially lead to negative transfer errors, which is why their teaching would require the contrastive approach.

#### 4. Conclusion

Despite their importance for natural language processing and fluency and their significance for language learners, research on teaching lexical collocations often seems neglected. The lack of extensive and diverse exploration stands in stark contrast to the potential wealth of collocations present in the song lyrics. Songs are a recognized tool in the language teaching and learning process, and they aid students of all ages and at different proficiency levels. This research aimed to investigate the frequency of use and types of lexical collocations in English and their translation equivalents in Bosnian, intending to add to the emerging and growing body of research on the pedagogical implications of the use of song lyrics. The results indicate that song lyrics from the analysed corpus contain a wide array of different collocational patterns, which is supported by the presence of all 6 types of English lexical collocations classified according to Benson and Ilson (1997) and lacking only the type added by (Chiekezie, 2021). This implies that songs have a potential for use in EFL teaching, as suggested by Lems (2005) and Engh (2013). The contrastive analysis revealed that some examples from English completely change to grammatical collocations, or even single nouns when translated to Bosnian and do not have the status of collocations in Bosnian. Further, the translation equivalents indicated that in 8.8% of the cases, there is no semantic congruency or alignment in meaning between the two languages. These results, therefore, suggest that song lyrics, due to their significant frequency of lexical collocations, can potentially prove beneficial in the language learning process and that a contrastive approach needs to be used when teaching collocations, as indicated by Cheriguene (2020). Thus, this paper represents a small step towards bridging the existing gap in genre-specific and contrastive investigations into the use of collocations with a focus on the pedagogical implications of song lyrics used in the context of English language learning.

#### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.



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