

A Corpus-Based Analysis of the Adjectives and Synonyms -Beautiful, Handsome, and Pretty

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the three synonyms *beautiful*, *handsome* and *pretty* in terms of their meanings and collocation with the help of the Longman Dictionary of contemporary English 6th edition (2014) and the British National Corpus (BNC). Only 100 concordance lines of each synonyms were selected from the corpora. This study was also aimed at investigating the similarities and differences between the three synonyms. The findings of this research declare that these synonyms are similar in their core meaning but are different in their detailed meanings and collocation. The results also clarifies that corpus provide more additional information that is not the part of dictionaries. It is also clear from the study that synonyms cannot be used in all the contexts alternately. Moreover, this study states that corpus is more helpful for the teachers of English as well as for second language learners (L2) because it gives additional information regarding any set of synonyms than dictionaries give. The teachers as well as students should be guided that they may get additional information about data from corpus than the dictionaries. As a result the students will be able in differentiating synonyms in a set by using both the resources, Learners Dictionaries and corpora, and in this way they will be able to increase their vocabulary.

Keywords: synonyms, dictionary, beautiful, corpus study

1. Introduction

It is commonly acknowledged that English has become a lingua franca which is used for international communication in all over the world. Due to the excessive use of English worldwide, it is difficult to distinguish native speakers, says (Harmer, 2007; Ajmal & Kumar, 2020; Kumar, 2020 b).

Language, either spoken or written, has become the inevitable part of our daily lives. People communicate with each other either verbally or non-verbally .But the most important part of the communication is the choice of the vocabulary (Kumar, 2020 a; Kumar, 2021). Selinker (2008) points out that, from the basic four skills vocabulary is the most important part of communication. Learning vocabulary has become one of the most challenging issues for the English language learning students (L2). Speakers as well as writers should not have to use the same words in their spoken and written language so that their listeners and readers may not get bored. Thus they have to use different words shared the same meanings called, “synonyms”. As Taylor (2002) pointed out that, “synonymy is the condition when a single meaning can be expressed by more than one lexical item”. Chung (2011) argued that, “linguists and lexicographers identified the phenomenon, which also includes substitution among synonymous words”.

The aim of this research is to investigate the differences and similarities of the selected adjectives beautiful, handsome and pretty in relation to the meanings and collocation. These three words are selected from the top most frequent 3000 words in the Longman communication dictionary with the symbols S1 and W1, the first 1000 most frequently used in written and spoken English as well. The next from, 1000 to 2000, with the symbols, S2 and W2 respectively, the second highest words in rank. These words indicate in a thesaurus table with a thesaurus note to

explain the words that are similar in their meanings. To sum up, beautiful, handsome and pretty are the synonyms which convey similar meanings and are used often in both spoken and written English. However second language learners often do not recognize these similarities and differences in terms of their core as well as detailed meanings and collocations.

According to Webb (2007), “words are likely to be confused by the learners that convey the same meanings than the words that do not have close semantic link”. In addition, for all the above mentioned types of the words will be explained in more detail in how these descriptions are made, why and on what basis differs for English language learners. The results to be developed will be used and is stated throughout the paper and will be used to clarify problems that can be seen when synonyms are taught in English classes (as a foreign language). As there are many branches of Languages, there are many equally definitions of the word- ‘word’. Nikolovska (2012) states that ‘traditionally ‘Grammar’ is the considerable part of the language that conveys meaning. ‘This is one of the extensively defined definitions of ‘word’.

With the spark of globalization the world is on the move and is just a click away. Everyone wants to interact others either verbally or non-verbally. But the only source of this interaction is language. Vocabulary in the form of spoken or written aspects of language plays an important role. Kumar et al. (2021), Bacha et al. (2021) and Sandora (2012) point out that in the field of language teaching, vocabulary has gained much importance in the past few decades whether synonyms, antonyms or homonyms etc. Mckeown, (2013) suggested that one of the first noteworthy points regarding vocabulary learning is the choice to be made about which words should be taught, in which order, and how they should be presented.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are,

- To investigate the similarities and differences in beautiful, handsome and pretty in terms of collocation and meanings.
- To compare and contrast the information of the selected synonyms given in Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English and The British National Corpus (BNC).
- To understand if this study helpful for English language teachers and second language learners (L2).

1.2 Research Questions

Q1: What are the similarities and differences between the three selected synonyms *beautiful*, *handsome* and *pretty*, in terms of meanings and collocations?

Q2: What is the similarity and difference between the information of the selected synonyms given in the (LDOCE) and the corpus data?

Q3: How do the study of these selected synonyms helpful for English language teachers and second language learners (L2)?

1.3 Significance of the Study

The corpus-based study of *beautiful*, *handsome* and *pretty* is important in many aspects. Firstly, the study provides a guideline for L2 learners to differentiate the three synonymous adjectives in usage. Secondly, this study demonstrates that the results from concordance lines will disclose the meanings and collocations of three synonyms, which come from the naturally-occurring texts. Thirdly, language teachers can utilize new teaching methods for vocabulary and other synonyms based on authentic language. Finally, the research shows that concordance lines provide additional information and examples surrounding KWIC or node words. Traditionally, L2 learners find the meaning of words from dictionaries. Hirvela (2004) proposed that, “the results propose an optional solution for L2 learners. They can implement a corpus program to search for and learn each word from authentic texts”.

2. Literature Review

Corpus linguistics is not a new field of study as it has two phases. The first phase is before 1950’s and second phase is after 1950’s. Corpus linguistics is the study of language or linguistic phenomenon through the analysis of data obtained from a corpus. As Sinclair (1991) points out that “words like in and of does not carry any meaning but the meaning is often conveyed through several words in a sequence”. This is the basic idea behind forming the backbone of corpus linguistics.

Lindquist (2009) says that, “in the past there was no authentic source of putting the linguistic examples in the form of txt”. However, now a day, authentic texts are collected with the help of an electronic machine especially a computer.

Thus the word corpus referred to the body of txt by a single author as, “the Shakespearean corpus”. In The United States of America, Nelson and Kucera (1911) compiled electronic based English texts called the Brown Corpus and the Frown Corpus. The word corpus has been derived from a Latin word which means, “the body of txt”. O Keefe (2007) defines corpus as, “ the electronically collected examples of language include both spoken and written that are analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively”.

Waller (2015) defines corpus as, “a collection of text which can be easily searched electronically”. Another definition according to Longman Dictionary of contemporary English, “A large collection of written or spoken language, i.e. a corpus of spoken English”. There are eight types of corpora, says Lindquist (2009). They are as under,

- Spoken
- General
- Specialized
- Historical
- Parallel
- Multilingual dictionaries as corpora
- Text as corpora
- Web as corpora

Bennett (2010) also points out that, “ there are eight different types of corpora that are helpful in classroom”. These are as followed,

- Generalized corpora
- Specialized corpora
- Leaner corpora
- Pedagogic corpora
- Historic corpora
- Parallel corpora
- Comparable corpora
- Monitor corpora

The example of generalized corpora are BNC (British national Corpus), The American National Corpus (ANC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA).

2.1 The Study of Synonyms

In oxford advanced learner’s dictionary (9th edition), it is stated that “synonym is a word or expression which conveys the same meanings or nearly the same in meaning”. According to this definition it is clear that synonyms can be words having the same meaning. As Palmer (1997) described that, “English language comprises a large number of synonyms and this because English language is the mixture of French language and a lot of French words have been borrowed into English language”. So having pairs of both native and foreign words synonyms referred to the words convey same meanings.

2.2 Strict and Loose Synonyms

There are two types of synonyms strict and loose synonyms. The word that can be substitute with each other in all other contexts are referred to as strict synonyms. But there substitution may not cause any change in meaning or style of message, says Jackson (2000). However it is very difficult to find such synonyms. Palmer (1997) pointed out that, “there is no chance to detect words that conveys exactly the same meanings because strict synonyms are hard to be in the use now a days”. Kreidler (1996) however suggested that “there are no such words that all the time share the same linguistic features”. On the other hand he said,” these words are useless that can be completely substitute in all the contexts”. However loose synonyms are such words which produce overlapping meaning but cannot be used in every situation, as suggested by said Amvela (2000) ,Çakmak et al. (2021), and Ghahderijani et al. (2021).

Linguists can differentiate only between these two sub categories of the synonyms, loose or strict synonyms. For example there is a word *find* with the synonym *discover*. So find cannot be substituted with discover in each

context: “*John found/discovered football in the grass*”. The sentence thus clarifies the ambiguity that finds means, “experiencing something” whereas discover means, “to come across for the first time”. It is clear that synonyms cannot be substituted with each other in all the contexts (Abdelrady et al., 2022).

2.3 Criteria for Distinguishing Synonyms

The following criteria can be helpful in distinguishing synonyms.

2.3.1 Degree of Formality

Synonyms in a set of words convey the same core meaning but in their detailed meaning, these words may be different in meanings. Some words are used in a formal contexts, while others are used in an informal contexts. On the other hand few words are said to be slang words but are commonly used in spoken English. However some are standard words, said Amvela (2000). Here are some examples to differentiate words in the degree of formality.

Formally	Informally
Benevolent	kind
Beverage	drink
Endeavor	try
Abominate	hate
English slangs	Standard English
Gobsmaked	astonished
Zap	destroy
Prank	crash
Sloshed	drunk

2.3.2 Collocations

Collocations are words often used together, (Longman dictionary of Contemporary English, 2014). According to Dell and Carthey (2008), “collocation means the words co-occur with each other naturally”. For example, pay co-occurs with attention and commit co-occur with crime. Palmer (1997) proposed that, “synonyms differ on the basis of collocation restrictions and are co-occur with other words”. To make this point more clear, the word rancid collocates with eggs and brains.

2.3.3 Grammatical Patterns

Phoocharoensil (2010) presented the criteria to distinguish the synonyms. He proposed that synonyms, though, sharing the same meanings, may be different in grammatical pattern. For example *consists of* and *be made up of* are literally denoting to the same meaning, but in correct to use, “My family is consisted of four people”. Same is the case with made up of. As, “My family is made up of four people”. These sentences are in passive voice and convey ungrammatical meaning. But if these words are used in active voice sentences, the structure is as, “my family makes up of four people”. This is also ungrammatical.

2.4 Previous Researches

A lot of researches have been done to focus on differentiating synonyms through corpus based from different corpus resources, i-e (COCA) the Corpus of contemporary American English or (BNC) the British National Corpus. Commonly most of the researcher used same criteria to distinguish synonyms in terms of meanings, collocations, degree or grammatical differences. A few researchers used corpus based data to investigate the difference and similarities between synonyms. Taylor (2003) tried to highlight the differences between *high* and *tall* in their sense of meaning. (LOB), Lancaster Oslo/Bergen corpus was used for data collection. The results of this research showed that high is more frequently used than tall ad that high is non-spatial as, high number, high temperature and so on. Whereas tall is spatial in terms of its use as high building, high ceiling etc.

Chung (2011) investigated two synonyms; create and produce, he obtained data from Brown Corpus and Frown corpus. The results showed that mostly these two synonyms co-occur with bare infinitive and in –ed form. Cai (2012) studied great with its six synonyms; awesome, excellent, fabulous, fantastic, terrific and wonderful. The source of data collection was the Corpus of contemporary American English (COCA). The research highlighted that great is most frequently used than all other synonyms. Moreover, fabulous, fantastic, great, terrific and wonderful occur in spoken language only while awesome and excellent are more common in written language, i-e in magazine etc.

Thamratana (2013) investigated five synonyms, decrease, dwindle, reduce, decline and diminish in relation to their grammatical structure, meaning and in the degree of formality. Two sources of data were used, oxford advanced learners dictionary (2010) and the corpus of contemporary American English (COCA). The results of the study proved that these synonyms have the same core meanings but in grammatical pattern and collocation, they occur differently. Other prominent linguists like Phoocharoensil (2010) investigated five synonyms ask, beg, plead, request and appeal, while Chanchotphattha (2013) examined three synonyms; different, various and diverse using different sources of data. Their result vary from one another in terms of grammatical patterns, collocations, core meaning, styles and so on. The aim of this study is to investigate the differences and similarities in terms of degree, collocation and grammatical structure of the three synonyms; beautiful, handsome and pretty, using two sources of data collection (LDOCE) and (BNC).

3. Method

3.1 Data Collection

In this study three English synonyms; *beautiful*, *handsome* and *pretty* were taken to see the differences, collocation and grammatical patterns. These synonyms were selected from Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 6th edition (2014). These words lies in the category of S1, S2 and S3 words, the most frequent used in spoken English and also from W1, W2 and W3 words, the most frequently used in written English. Jackson (2000) proposed that “if a student wants to learn English, these 3000 top most frequent used words may constitute 86% of his vocabulary”. That is why such words from this category were selected. This study investigates only three adjectives beautiful, handsome and pretty, from the 3000 top most frequently used English words in spoken and written. Only 100 concordance lines will be selected for the generation of the results which means that the study may not cover the other possible occurrences of these targeted words. This study is limited to only one corpus-based data source that is British national corpora (BNC) and the other source of data driven, the Longman dictionary of contemporary English (LDOCE) 9th edition, is used to determine the results. The aim of this research is to study the British English and the results of the study may not be generalized to other dialects of American English.

3.2 Sampling Techniques

In this study random sampling technique was used to collect the data so that there might be no chance of biasness. *Beautiful*, *handsome* and *pretty* were selected randomly from the Longman dictionary of communication contained 3000 most frequently used words.

The British National Corpus (BNC) is a large and freely available computer-based corpus which stores 100 million words of British English both written and spoken texts. The BNC project is a co-operation between Oxford University, Lancaster University, The British Library, Longman Group Ltd and Chambers. It started in 1991 and took three years to compile said Leech (1992). Currently, the BNC is widely used in linguistics research.

4. Discussion and Results

There were two sources used for the collection of data in this study, I-e Longman dictionary of contemporary English, 6th edition (2014) and British national corpus (BNC). The aim of this study was to understand the differences and similarities of the three selected synonyms, grammatical structure.

Table 1. Meanings are the initial part of words in a language. For the purpose of getting meaning Longman dictionary of contemporary English 6th edition (2014) was used.

		Meanings
Synonyms	Longman Dictionary of contemporary English	Examples
Beautiful	Someone /something that is beautiful is extremely attractive to look at. Very good or giving someone pleasure.	She was even more beautiful than I had remembered. Beautiful music What a beautiful shot! The weather was beautiful .
Handsome	A man who is handsome and looks attractive. An animal, object or building that is handsome and looks attractive in an impressive way. [only before noun] A handsome money is large enough to win. A handsome gift or prize. A handsome victory.	An extremely handsome young man. A row of handsome Georgian houses. A handsome profit, a handsome fee,

		There are some handsome prizes to be won. They won a handsome victory.
Pretty	Fairly or more than a little Pretty well/much A woman or child who is pretty has a nice and attractive face Something that is pretty is pleasant to look at	She still look pretty miserable. She is pretty good to me. A pretty little girl A pretty dress The tune is pretty What a little pretty garden

Table 2. Meanings were drawn from the thesaurus box of the Longman dictionary of contemporary English 6th edition (2014)

Meaning		
Synonyms For persons	Thesaurus box (LDOCE)	Examples
Beautiful	A beautiful woman or child has good look.	Kelly was a beautiful woman. A beautiful baby.
Handsome	Used especially about a man who has a nice face. In contrast, in literature, handsome is used for a woman who has a strong face.	Such a nice and handsome man. A handsome baby. She was a big handsome woman.
Pretty	A pretty grill or woman looks nice, especially used for a woman who has a nice face.	You look pretty with your hair down. She has a very pretty face.
Synonyms For place or thing	Thesaurus box (LDOCE)	Examples
Beautiful	Beautiful is used to describe something that looks good and give you lot of pleasure.	A beautiful tropical beach. The weather outside was beautiful. The beautiful song.
Handsome	-----	-----
Pretty	Pleasant to look at, often used about things that are not big or impressive.	A pretty little pink dress. A pretty village.

Three synonyms *beautiful*, *handsome* and *pretty* were selected for this study. Data in table 1 & 2 was collected from (LDOCE) and the thesaurus box of (LDOCE) to find out the similarities and differences of the selected synonyms. From the data, one thing is clear that these synonyms convey the same core meanings but these cannot be used in all the contexts alternately. Bergdahl (2009) described that, “words may be different according to their features but convey similar core meaning”. Aroonmanakun (2015) also suggested that, “synonyms convey overlapping as well as non-overlapping senses of meaning”. The results of the study show the difference in *beautiful* and *handsome* as described by Bergdahl (2009) and Aroonmanakun (2015). *Beautiful* and *handsome* are similar in their core meaning but different in detailed meaning. For example *beautiful* is specific to a *woman* while *handsome* is specific to man, i-e a handsome man and beautiful woman. On the contrary these words cannot be used alternately as handsome woman or beautiful man.

Same is the case with places or things in terms of relating these three synonyms in overlapping meanings. They are different in the sense of their meaning at used in contexts and cannot be used alternately. The data shows that *handsome* is not used with place/thing. For example we cannot say like, “I have a *handsome pen*”, or “I live in a *handsome village*”. The sentences are grammatical but vague in their meanings. However, *beautiful* and *pretty* are specific in their contextual meanings and can never be used alternately.

Have a look at these sentences,

- A **beautiful** tropical **beach**
- The **beautiful** song.
- She still looks **pretty** miserable.
- She is **pretty** good to me.

Now the senses are completely changed when beautiful and pretty are used alternately.

- A *pretty* tropical beach.
- The weather outside was *pretty*.
- She still looks *beautiful* miserable.
- She is *beautiful* good to me.

The results show that the synonyms *beautiful*, *handsome* and *pretty* are similar in their core meanings but different in detailed meanings as termed as loose synonyms described by (Amvela and Jackson, 2000) because they are not used in all the contexts alternately.

4.1 Collocation

Palmer (1997) stated that, “synonyms, in their core meaning, may be same but different in their collation”. In this study the results clearly manifest that beautiful, handsome and pretty co-occur with same and different noun and adverb collocates. These collocates were taken from the Longman dictionary of contemporary English (2014) and the British National Corpus (BNC).

Table 3. Noun collocates of beautiful, handsome and pretty from Longman dictionary of contemporary English (2014) and the British National Corpus (BNC).

Synonyms	Longman dictionary of contemporary English (LDOCE)	British National Corpus (BNC)
Beautiful	Weather, flowers, shot, song, beach, children, baby, woman, land, city. (10 collocates)	Country, woman, bodhisattva, face, things, legs, sound, men, morning, hands, performance, cake, parkland, picture, garden, plant, glider, body, eyes, stories, hair, master, prince, manner. (24 collocates)
Handsome	Houses, profit, fee, victory, reward, face, gift, money. (8 collocates)	Chief, curate, Henry, man, woman, lad, king, building, victory, wife, distance, smile, beard, face, son, prince, peasant, heroes, prince, devil, throat, book, actor. (23 collocates)
Pretty	Woman, child, girl, face, garden, tune, dress, flowers, voice, village, wallpaper. (11 collocates)	Face, eyes, lightweight, lady, pink, funny, woman, routine. (8 collocates)

According to the results in table 3 it is clear that there is a difference among the three synonyms in noun collocates obtained from the dictionary and the British National Corpus (BNC). It is obvious that *beautiful* has the highest collocates among all the three synonyms as it has 10 collocates from the dictionary and 24 from BNC, following *handsome* with 8 collocates from the dictionary and 23 collocates from BNC, whereas *pretty* with 11 collocates from the dictionary and 23 from BNC. On the basis of result, it may be pointed out *beautiful* conveys more in depth meanings than *handsome* and *pretty*. It is also clear that these three synonyms have some shared collocates in terms of their meanings.

Table 4. Shared collocates among the synonyms *beautiful*, *handsome* and *pretty*.

Shared noun collocates			
<i>Beautiful</i> and <i>handsome</i>	<i>Handsome</i> and <i>pretty</i>	<i>Beautiful</i> and <i>pretty</i>	<i>Beautiful</i> , <i>handsome</i> and <i>pretty</i>
Woman, man, face,	Woman, face	Woman, face, eyes	Woman, face

According to the data in table 4, it is clear that only a few noun collocates are shared collocates in respect to the data presented in table 3. Woman and face are the two collocates which are shared collocates from all the three synonyms. It is clear that *beautiful* and *handsome* have three shared collocates while *handsome* and *pretty* have only 2 shared collocates, whereas, *beautiful* and *pretty* also have three shared collocates. The result show that beautiful is more near to pretty in terms of noun collocates than handsome.

Table 5. Adverb collocates of beautiful, handsome and pretty from Longman dictionary of contemporary English (LDOCE) and The British National Corpus (BNC)

Synonyms	Longman dictionary of contemporary English (LDOCE)	British National Corpus (BNC)	
Beautiful	More, very, incredibly, most (4 collocates)	Most, so, harmoniously, elegantly, more, totally, perfectly. (7 collocates)	
Handsome	Extremely, more, really, very. (4 collocates)	Still, very, rather, lazily, most, incredibly, wonderfully, more, stately, extremely, ripely, darkly. (12 collocates)	
Pretty	Really, very (2 collocates)	Very, generally, soon, good (4 collocates)	
Shared noun collocates			
<i>Beautiful and handsome</i>	<i>Handsome and pretty</i>	<i>Beautiful and pretty</i>	<i>Beautiful, handsome and pretty</i>
More, very, most	Very	Very	Very

According to the data in table 5, adverb collocates of three synonyms beautiful, handsome and pretty, which were taken from Longman dictionary of contemporary and The British National Corpus (BNC). The result declares that among the three synonyms, *handsome* has more collocates (as 12 from BNC and 4 from the dictionary) than beautiful and pretty, while beautiful have 7 from BNC and 4 from the dictionary, whereas *pretty* have 4 from BNC and 2 from the dictionary. The result also clears that three synonyms have only one (*very*) shared adverb collocates. Beautiful and handsome have more, most and very as shared adverb collocates while the other three categories have only one shared adverb collocate, i-e *very*. According to the Macmillan Collocation Dictionary (2010), it is stated that very is a weak form of adverb because it can be used with almost all the adjectives.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the three synonyms *beautiful*, *handsome* and *pretty* in terms of their meanings and collocation with the help of the Longman Dictionary of contemporary English 6th edition (2014) and the British National Corpus (BNC). This study was also aimed at investigating the similarities and differences between the three synonyms. The findings of this research declare that these synonyms are similar in their core meaning but are different in their detailed meanings and collocation. The results also clarifies that corpus provide more additional information that is not the part of dictionaries. Moreover, this study states that corpus is more helpful for the teachers of English as well as for second language learners (L2) because it gives additional information regarding any set of synonyms than dictionaries give. It is also clear from the study that synonyms cannot be used in all the contexts alternately. The teachers as well as students should be guided that they may get additional information about data from corpus than the dictionaries. As a result the students will be able in differentiating synonyms in a set by using both the resources: learners' dictionaries and corpora, and in this way they will be able to increase their vocabulary. This study is limited because three synonyms and two data sources are selected for the conduct of this study. This not last but least, more synonyms and other data collection techniques will be adopted to get detailed information regarding synonyms.

6. Limitation of the Study

This study investigates only three adjectives *beautiful*, *handsome* and *pretty*, from the 3000 top most frequently used English words in spoken and written. Only 100 concordance lines will be selected for the generation of the results which means that the study may not cover the other possible occurrences of these targeted words. This study is limited to only one corpus-based data source that is British national corpora (BNC) and the other source of data, the Longman dictionary of contemporary English (LDOCE) 6th edition, is used to determine the results. The aim of this research is to study the British English and the results of the study may not be generalized to other dialects of American English.

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