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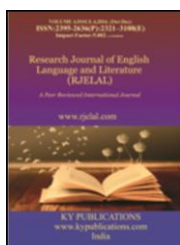
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**Lexical collocations of “EAT” and “WEAR” in American English:  
A corpus-based study of sociolinguistics approach**

**LINH D. TRAN**

School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China



**ABSTRACT**

Collocations transmit cultural and societal meanings and stereotypes which have built up over time; therefore, research of collocations, especially lexical collocations, provides particular insights into history. The present study examines verb-noun lexical collocations of “eat” and “wear” between 1800 and 2000 through three corpora: Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and Google Books (American). Whilst exploring possible semantic changes in the use of these two verbs, the author seeks for the explanation of the alternative of old collocations and the appearance of new ones. It is found that there is not much fluctuation in the meaning of “eat” and “wear” after two centuries. Besides, it also reveals that social changes have had great impacts on language changes which can modify or create new collocations in the verb-noun lexical collocation of “eat” and “wear”. By means of identifying the syntagmatic and paradigmatic properties of verb-noun lexical collocation of “eat” and “wear”, it is clearly shown that corpus has potential applications in translation studies, language teaching, and other scientific fields.

Keywords: corpus-based study; sociolinguistics; verb-noun lexical collocations; American English.

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

The present paper explores the collocational behavior and semantic prosody of the two verbs “eat” and “wear” in American English from 1800 to 2000. The importance of these concepts to language learning is well recognized. Yet while collocation and semantic prosody have attracted much interest from researchers studying the English language, there has been little work done on collocation and semantic prosody of special words than in the whole language. The two verbs “eat” and “wear” refer to bodily actions and everyday physiological experiences common to all humans so that they could be called “basic” verbs.

Obviously, those “basic” verbs appear to be the objects of interest and research for linguists, but they are restricted to a cognitive linguistic orientation, for instance, “come” and “go” (Radden, 1996; Shen 1996), “stand” and “lie” (Borneto, 1996), “eat” and “drink” (Newman, 1997).

This is an interdisciplinary study with the combination of corpus linguistics and sociolinguistics to investigate the collocations of the two “basic” verbs “eat” and “wear” in American English since till now, there are no studies on the collocation and semantic prosody in order to examine whether there are any changes in their verb-noun



collocations, and if any, so which factors contributing to these changes.

By using three corpora with high representativeness, the present study has possibilities to explore the chronological semantic changes of the two verbs in a long period of time. On one hand, it seeks for identifying the properties of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations between two verbs “eat” – “wear” and their contiguous nouns in the concordances. On the other hand, it tries to detect American cultural-societal inflexions that may affect any changes of the verbs’ properties.

## 2. Literature review

Collocation has been studied for at least six decades. The concept of “collocations” was first identified by Palmer (1933, as cited in Nation, 2002:317) as a sequence of words or terms that “must or should be learned, or is best or most conveniently learned as an integral whole or independent entity, rather than by the process of piercing together their component parts”. However, collocation was first used as a technical term by Firth (1957) and his notion of collocation is essentially quantitative. He considers “collocations of a given word are statements of the habitual or customary places of that word” (Firth, 1968:181). This approach to collocation is supported by many corpus linguists (Hunston, 2002; McEneaney and Wilson, 2001; Sinclair, 1991; Halliday, 1966). Besides, collocation has been discussed in terms of a continuum, in which they are placed in the middle position. At the two ends of the continuum are free combinations, which are phrases constructed using rules or syntax, and idioms, which allow little or no variation in form and whose meaning cannot be determined by the literal meanings of the individual words (Gitsaki, 1999; Howarth, 1998; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1997).

As stated by Halliday and Hasan (1989), collocations are discussed as one of five means for achieving lexical cohesion. Repeated use of collocations, among other devices such as repetition and reference, is one way to produce a more cohesive text. Collocations include any set of words whose members participate in a semantic relation. In later years, MEL’CUK (1998) provides a more restricted view of collocations. In the meaning-text

model, collocations are positioned within the framework of lexical functions (LFs). An LF is a semantic-syntactic relation which connects a word or phrase with a set of words or phrases. LFs formalize the fact that in language there are words, or phrases, whose usage is bound by another word in the language. In addition, he classifies collocations into two types: *grammatical collocations*, which often contain prepositions, including paired syntactic categories, and *lexical collocations*, which are lexically restricted word pairs and only a subset of the synonyms of the collocator can be used in the same lexical context.

In recent decades, the researches on lexical collocations have turned into the field of applied linguistics, particularly in EFL teaching and learning (Laufer & Waldman, 2011; Hsu & Chiu, 2008; Hsu, 2007; Chan & Liou, 2005; Nesselhauf, 2003; Bahns & Eldaw, 1993; Granger, 1998). Those studies mostly rely on elicitation tests and often contain translation tasks with an aim of examining collocation competence of English learners. It is noteworthy that researchers do not only conduct some studies so as to explore the relation between collocations and language proficiency of EFL learners but also make some deep small-scaled surveys to discover the societal-cultural features implied, which benefits learners of English as well. Those surveys have gone into the details of basic vocabulary class which expresses people’s daily activities, such as *drink, eat, wear, sleep*. Hook and Pardeshi (2009) focused on the temporal change of EAT-expressions in semantic and lexical aspects meaning in Hindu-Urdu and Marahi languages. It was detected that the semantic expansion of Eat not only expands base meaning directly but also affects the expansion of derived meaning, subsequently, antonyms in the same sequence can be generated. In addition, when applying comparative-contrastive methods to assess the lexicalization, extensions, and salient human concepts of “eat” and “drink” in some specific languages, Newman (2009) gave some sense of the polysemy as well as the cross-linguistic overview of properties of these verbs. More importantly, he proposed five criteria to classify the semantic representation of the central meaning constituents of “eat” and “drink”. They are Internal Complexity;

Spatial-Temporal Profile; Active Zone; Force Dynamics; and Typical Social/Cultures Significance. Nonetheless, though having denoted the cultural impacts, the views in the studies of Hook & Pardeshi and Newman are not as clear as in Wierzbicka’s (1997) work. She put forth the concept of “key words” which often occur with high frequency; and which are commonly used in a certain semantic scope in a language and considered them as an approach to the study of culture in spite of several limitations. Since then, many studies have been carried out to describe some characteristics of “collocations” as well as the relation between “collocation” and cultural-societal factors in individual languages (Jingxian, 2012; Mustafa, 2010; Williams, 2009; Bragina, 1996). However, those studies have not been satisfied due to their general approaches and lack of realistic illustration. Moreover, the literature has not discussed the verb-noun lexical collocations of “eat” and “wear” in American English. As a result, the present paper will provide a close and deep insight into American culture and society and their changes in 200 years (1800-2000) as “eat” and “wear” are two basic

words spoken daily in people’s lives. So as to complete the task, this study proposes the two following hypotheses:

- (1) There has been an existence of alternation of Verb-Noun lexical collocations of the two verbs: “eat” and “wear” between 1800 – 1899 and 1900 – 2000.
- (2) The change of cultural-societal factors has made influence on linguistic element and the usage of languages.

**3. Methodology**

3.1. **Semantic features of “eat” and “wear”:** Both “eat” and “wear” are polysemous words and their definitions vary on different dictionaries. Basically, the definitions of those two verbs in this study are summarized from “*The American heritage dictionary of the English language*” (the 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company) and “*Oxford English dictionary – The definitive record of the English language*” (2015, Oxford University Press).

Table 1: The definitions of “EAT” and “EAR”

EAT	Transitive verb	1.Eat a. To take into the mouth piecemeal, and masticate and swallow as food; to consume as food; usually of solids only. b. Of liquid or semifluid food. Now chiefly with reference to soup, or other similar food for which a spoon is used. c. Consume food (by animals and microorganism) 2.To destroy, ravage, or use up by or as if by ingesting (usually money or wealth) 3.To erode or corrode 4.To produce by eating 5.(Slang) To absorb the cost or expense of: 6.(Informal) To bother or annoy: 7.(Vulgar slang) To perform cunnilingus or anilingus on
	Intransitive verb	1.To consume food, to take or have the meal 2.To exercise a consuming or eroding effect 3.To cause persistent annoyance or distress
	Phrasal verbs	1.(Slang) eat (someone) alive: To overwhelm or defeat thoroughly 2.(Slang) eat up a. To receive or enjoy enthusiastically or avidly b. To believe without question
WEAR	Transitive verb	1.To carry or have on one's person as covering, adornment, or protection; To carry or have habitually on one's person, especially as an aid

		2.To display in one's appearance 3.To bear, carry, or maintain in a particular manner 4.To damage, diminish, erode, or consume by long or hard use, attrition, or exposure; Often used with "away, down, or off" 5.To produce by constant use, attrition, or exposure 6.To bring to a specified condition by long use or attrition 7.To fatigue, weary, or exhaust
	Intransitive verb	1.Be lasting a. To last under continual or hard use b. To last through the passage of time 2.To pass gradually or tediously 3.To break down or diminish through use or attrition
	Phrasal verbs	1.wear down: To break down or exhaust by relentless pressure or resistance 2.wear off: To diminish gradually in effect 3.wear out a. To make or become unusable through long or heavy use b. To exhaust; tire c. To use up or consume gradually

3.2. **Corpora used in the study:** The corpora are used for this study are: *first*, Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) which allows researchers to search for more than 400 million words of text from 1810 to 2009; *second*, Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) with 450 million words; and *third*, Google Books (American) with 115 billion words of texts. All three resources facilitate researchers to study lexical changes, changes in phraseology, syntactic changes, semantic changes and changes in discourse. Especially, by examining changes in collocates to look for evidence of changes in discourse, those corpora provide interesting insights into culture and society.

3.3. **Data analysis:** Firstly, the searched queries of Verb-Noun lexical collocations of the two verbs EAT and WEAR used to collect 800 cases during two shorter periods: 1800-1899 and 1900-2000 are "eat [nn\*]" and "wear [nn\*]" respectively. In order to facilitate the survey, the eligible cases should exclude these following characteristics:

- (1) When verb and noun in a concordance line lie in separate sentences; usually they are impeded by punctuation marks.
- (2) When verb and noun in a concordance line are impeded by prepositions such as by, with, from, etc. In these cases, it is impossible to identify the meaning of the

verb by its relation with the rear noun; thus, there is a must to rely on the context.

- (3) Unidentified meaning cases due to lacking context factor, normally because the noun is just a complement part of a compound noun or a phrase.
- (4) The cases when the combination of consecutive rear noun and preposition and/or articles creates different part of speech (numeral, classifier, etc.)

After the election, the result showed that there was only approximate 50% data (416 cases) suitable for the requirements and purposes of the study. The next step is to manually classify the nouns accompanying with EAT and WEAR into concrete and abstract nouns, then further sort them into some sub-categories based on the semantic features of two verbs. Lastly, the analysis of some certain alternatives of verb-noun collocations of "eat" and "wear" are conducted to explore how cultural and social factors impact on it.

**4. Results and Discussions**

**4.1. Verb-Noun collocations of "eat"**

*From 1800 – 1899*

During the time, the interaction between "eat" with other units (words) was stronger, particularly for the relation with nouns in the concordances. However, the majority of noun

companies that the verb “eat” lied on concrete nouns, which account for more than 35.5%.

Table 2: Classification of nouns in Verb-Noun collocations of “eat” from 1800 – 1899

CAT (Category)	Number	Percentage
CON	71	35.50%
ABS	34	17%
CON/ABS	1	0.50%
CON*	1	0.50%
DISC	93	46.50%
Total	200	100.00%

SUBCAT (Sub-category)	Number	Percentage
EATABLE	64	59.81%
UNIT	8	7.48%
UNEATABLE	1	0.93%
FREE	26	24.30%
IDIOM	6	5.61%
*	2	1.87%
Total	107	100.00%

The nouns divided into five sub-categories, in which EATABLE, UNEATABLE, and UNIT are pertaining to the category of CON; and FREE and IDIOM are regarding category of ABS. It can be seen that the proportion of nouns belonging to CON category has covered twice as much as ABS category. And the sub-category of EATABLE is dominant with the highest frequency (59,81%). In other words, the base meaning of EAT closely connected to the act of consuming food which obviously is the most important and common meaning of the verb “eat”.  
 From 1900-2000.

In the period of 1900 – 2000, the nouns in the Verb-Noun lexical collocations of EAT contained of six sub-categories. Except for the four similar sub-categories of the period 1800 – 1899 (EATABLE, UNIT, IDIOM, FREE), two new sub-categories were

added: SUBSTANCE and UNID (Unidentified). The sub-category UNEATABLE was replaced by UNID. The sub-category of EATABLE still took the first place in the order (64.29%).

Table 3: Classification of nouns in Verb-Noun collocations of "eat" from 1900-2000

CAT (Category)	Number	Percentage
CON	63	31.50%
ABS	17	8.50%
CON/ABS	2	1.00%
CON*	2	1.00%
DISC	116	58.00%
Total	200	100.00%

SUBCAT (Sub-category)	Number	Percentage
EATABLE	54	64.29%
UNIT	8	9.52%
SUBSTANCE	2	2.38%
UNID	1	1.19%
FREE	10	11.90%
IDIOM	7	8.33%
*	2	2.38%
Total	85	100.00%

Though the base meaning of “eat” still was the act of consuming food; the disappearance of a sub-category and appearance of two new sub-categories demonstrated that due to some impacts on language (American English) in 1900 – 2000, some alterations must have occurred.

**4.2. Verb-Noun collocations of “wear”**

From 1800 – 1899

Table 4: Classification of noun collocations of "wear" from 1800 to 1899

CAT (Category)	Number	Percentage
CON	92	46.00%
ABS	28	14.00%
CON/ABS	1	0.50%
DISC	79	39.50%
Total	200	100.00%

SUBCAT (Sub- category)	Number	Percentage
FABRIC	8	6.61%
ACCESSORIES	32	26.45%
OUTFIT	37	30.58%
OBJECT	9	7.44%
WEAPON	3	3.31%
FREE	19	15.70%
IDIOM	9	2.48%
*	4	7.44%
Total	121	100.00%

From 1800 to 1899, the nouns in collocations of “wear” were divided into seven sub-categories (FABRIC, ACCESSORIES, OUTFIT, OBJECT, WEAPON pertain to the category of CON; FREE, IDIOM belong to the category of ABS). Among them, the nouns of OUTFIT sub-category had the highest frequency (30.58%). It meant the base meaning of WEAR closely attached to the act of carrying the clothes, accessories, etc.; and it was apparently the most important and common meaning of the verb “wear”.

*From 1900 to 2000*

The number of nouns in Verb-Noun lexical collocations of “wear” belonging to concrete category still took the first place with OUTFIT as the lead sub-category (49.04%). Also, the order of other sub-categories remained the same. In abstract category, the nouns pertaining to FREE sub-category surpassed ones belonging to IDIOM sub-category (6.73% and 3.85%, respectively). Similar to the previous times (1800 – 1899), the base meaning of “wear” in the phase of 1900 – 2000 still attached to the act of covering the body with clothes or having accessories on. Hence, after two centuries, the semantic factor was still stable and unfluctuated.

In sum, the verb-noun lexical collocations of the two verbs: “eat” and “wear” between 1800 to 1899 and 1900 to 2000 changed. Compared to the nineteenth century, the activities of the two verbs “eat” and “wear” in the relations with other units (words) in the twentieth century had gradually been stronger. Although the meanings of the verb “eat” have had several alterations between the two periods: 1800 to 1899 and 1900 to 2000, generally, its sense was still linked to the act of consuming food. It can be said that this has been the most important and common meaning of “eat”.

In addition, depending on the result of the inquiry, the present study has authenticated the existence of non-linguistic constituents which affected American English during 1900 to 2000, and make the differences between 1800 to 1899 and 1900 to 2000. Besides, after 200 years, the base meaning of “wear” is still connected closely to the act of covering the body by clothes or having accessories on. It hardly has any semantic changes, thus, it can be said that this is the most common and firmly meaning of “wear”.

**4.3. Impact of American social-cultural changes on verb-noun collocations of “eat” and “wear”**

Although the main meaning of two verbs in American English in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when associating with nouns is the base meaning, there are some unavoidable changes in the period of 1900 to 2000 in comparison with the former. In this section, some certain changes in verb-noun collocations of “eat” and “wear” are analyzed to figure out whether the societal-cultural changes have an impact on changes in the collocations of two verbs or not.

- “eat” + protein: the association between the verb “eat” and the noun “protein” only appeared during 1900 to 2000, and there is no case occurring in 1800 to 1899 even the noun “protein” has appeared since 1815 with 5 times of occurrence



WORD(S)	CHARTS	TOTAL	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
1 eat too much protein	G	274										5	44	16	12	3	3	1	8	26	47	109
2 eat high - protein	G	159															2	1	18	28	49	61
3 eat a high protein	G	71															1	7	12	17	22	12
4 eat plenty of protein	G	59											7				3	1	7	5	8	28
5 eat much more protein	G	56											9	5	4			2	1	7	16	12
6 eat lots of protein	G	52															1	1	9	10	6	25
7 eat no animal protein	G	46																2		9	11	24
8 eat far more protein	G	42														2			3	13	14	10
TOTAL		759	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	60	21	16	5	10	15	58	115	173	281

Figure 1: "eat" + protein (Source: Google Books)

The collocation "eat – protein" has appeared since 1900 with five times occurrence of the phrase "eat too much protein" in Google Books. Nonetheless, as seen in picture 1, the appearance of other concordances is sporadic and scattered in 1910 to 1950 with a small amount (the lowest rate is 5 times in 1940, the highest rate is 60 times in 1910). From 1960 on, the frequency of "eat – protein" has become stable and gradually climbed up (from 15 times to 281 times in 2000).

The word "protein" appeared very early but at that time, there was less chance, facility, and condition to study science as well as nutrition; therefore, the term "protein" had not occurred in the verb-noun lexical collocations of "eat" on COHA, COCA, and Google Books. Until the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when nutrition and health issues have received more consideration and the condition for science improvement has increased (Atwater, 1904,

1894), the concordances of "eat – protein" started to appear in the corpora. It is clearly that "eat – protein" almost disappeared during 1920-1960 when there was a rapid increase in heart disease. It resulted that American consumption of animal fats declined but consumption of hydrogenated and industrially processed vegetable fats increased dramatically (Nienhiser, 2000). The assumption is the researches into nutrition from animals were temporarily stopped.

- "wear" + jeans: the term "jeans" refers to a particular style of pants which were invented by Jacob Davis in 1871 and patented by Davis and Levi Strauss on May 20, 1873. Even though jeans occurred in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the word "jeans" in Verb-Noun lexical collocations of WEAR started to appear in official texts.

WORD(S)	CHARTS	TOTAL	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
1 wear blue jeans	G	1242								1		8	3	2	9	16	72	93	164	221	309	344
2 wear tight jeans	G	156																7	9	26	58	56
3 wear my jeans	G	103															1	3	12	16	31	40
4 wear designer jeans	G	74																	3	20	26	25
5 wear the jeans	G	61																2	2	7	17	33
6 wear those jeans	G	59																	6	3	19	31
7 wear with jeans	G	58																	4	6	10	38
8 wear your jeans	G	57															1	6	6	15	29	
9 wear their jeans	G	49																	1	7	15	26
10 wear black jeans	G	48																			21	26
11 wear baggy jeans	G	42																		1	8	33
12 wear these jeans	G	41															2	1	2	1	14	21
TOTAL		1,990	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	8	3	2	9	16	75	108	209	314	543	702

Figure 2: "wear" + jeans (Source: Google Books)

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, from 1910 to 1930, no concordance of "wear – jeans" is saved in the corpora. It is assumed that one of the causes leading to this problem is that the racism and discrimination of black people in America are extremely serious at that historic time. Nevertheless, starting in the 1950s, jeans, were designed for miners – which are considered as labor jobs of lower class or working class in society. In the

early 20<sup>th</sup> century, even in the Progressive Era (1900 – 1917), when middle-class black people have put many efforts into helping their compatriots to ameliorate their living conditions; they actively established and participated in campaigns against racial discrimination. As a result, though it was not a completely success, the racism in American society partly declined. With that societal-historical situation, "jeans" are mostly ignored by white

people because they were seen as a product for black people. Hence, the word “jeans” was not mentioned in fashion magazines and publications which address the whites only. The 50s – the most striking times of fashion witnessed the turning tables of jeans. Owing to their high durability as compared to other common fabrics, “distressed” (visibly aged and worn, but still intact and functional) jean products became increasingly fashionable and have been noticed by the whites. Therefore, the concordances of “wear – jeans” appeared in the corpora during this time.

By means of the corpora, the evidences illustrate the influences of societal inflections on the semantic element of verb-noun lexical collocations of the two verbs “eat” and “wear”. The first factor is historical events: The alteration of each historical process leads to social changes (in politics, culture, etc.) (“wear – jeans”). As a result, these changes have made influences on human mentality and awareness; therefore, language has functioned as means of communication and intellectual tools, is also affected and changed (language generation or language loss of certain collocations). The second factor is science and technology advances, which also are vital societal inflections generating new words – science terminologies and new collocations appearing only in this particular period, not the former ones (“eat – protein”).

These societal inflections have made impacts on human mentality, which affects their awareness and language choice. As a result, the changes of social constituents and mentality in language at each period have led to language alteration.

## 5. Conclusion

Two hypotheses were proposed in this paper: There is an existence of alternations of Verb-Noun lexical collocations of the two verbs: “eat” and “wear” between the period of 1800 – 1899 and 1900 – 2000; and the causes of those differences are owing to the changes of cultural-societal features that lead to the changes of language and language usage. The results show that the semantic prosody of “eat” and “wear” is relatively stable during 200 years. There is the alternative of the nouns that two verbs keep company with but the core meaning of

“eat” and “wear” does not change. The results also demonstrate the high possibility of the hypothesis that the changes of American societal inflections influence on semantic alteration of verb-noun lexical collocations of “eat” and “wear”. In other words, due to the nature of tendentially attaching to social alteration, as well as the incessant change and improvement of languages as variable factors to adapt to social circumstances, languages have changed. Societal factors such as *Historical features* and *Science and technology advances* have dominated languages. These findings may be applied in language teaching as explanations for the appearance of some special language combinations in a certain time.

With a perspective of diachronic linguistics, the study takes both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the representation of EAT and WEAR in American English from 1800 to 2000. For more generalizable results, firstly it might be furthered to all collocational types of “eat” and “wear”. Secondly, further study might be conducted to chronologically investigate other “basic” verbs or nouns that are related to human beings’ daily lives. Lastly, other research might focus on the collocations of “eat” and “wear” in British English and the comparison to the one examined in this study.

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