

A Corpus-based Comparative Study of English Synonyms: A Case Study of “Totally”, “Absolutely” and “Completely”

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Abstract: The discrimination of synonyms has always been an intractable problem in foreign language learning. Previous studies mainly focused on synonyms of verbs, adjectives and nouns whereas few studies have ever been concerned with synonyms of degree adverbs. So, it's necessary to explore degree adverbs used by native English speaker, aiming to provide references for Chinese English learners to choose and use degree adverbs reasonably. This study is based on the COCA corpus (Corpus of Contemporary American English). Three synonyms including “totally”, “absolutely” and “completely” are selected as the research objects, and a multi-dimensional comparative analysis in terms of word frequency, register distribution, colligations and semantic prosody are conducted. The results show that: (1) “completely” has the highest frequency of use among English native speakers and appears in various fields, with wide applicability. It is not only applicable to informal occasions, but also to formal ones, mostly showing a negative semantic prosody. (2) The frequency of “absolutely” in the COCA Corpus is second only to that of “completely”. It is often used in informal occasions with neutral semantic prosody. (3) “totally” is commonly seen in the field of film and television with negative semantic prosody in most cases. Based on these findings, some suggestions for foreign language teaching and learning are provided.

Keywords: Discrimination of Synonyms; Semantic Prosody; Colligation; COCA Corpus.

1. Introduction

English vocabulary is the basis of second language learning and also the foundation of human communication and the second language teaching. Synonyms account for a large proportion in the vocabulary, which makes them both difficult and essential in the process of vocabulary learning. Synonyms refer to words that have the same or similar lexical meanings but differ in usage. In English, synonyms form a vast and complex English vocabulary system through the sameness or similarity in meaning and usage[1]. The discrimination of synonyms has always been a key and difficult point in English learning, because it is very difficult to find two words that can be exchanged in any situation. Therefore, how to enable students to better understand the usage of synonyms has become a major problem in the process of second language teaching.

The traditional way to discriminate synonyms mainly relies on the intuition of lexicographers, who often use introspection to judge the differences between synonyms. However, in practical application, this method is not effective for most English learners[1]. The way that dictionaries used to define words have certain limitations, that is, it just lists a few meanings and explains them with a few simple sentences, which is often detached from the real context and context. After reading the explanations and examples in the dictionary, learners still do not truly understand the differences in the usage of synonyms. Because linguists also have certain subjectivity and limitations when compiling dictionaries. Sentences deliberately fabricated to illustrate and demonstrate a certain specific language framework lack sufficient validity and credibility in reflecting the real language use. These artificially constructed sentences are highly likely to impose unnatural language structures on actual language use, thereby resulting in misinterpretation of

authentic language[2].

The emergence of semantic prodigy and corpus provides a new perspective for distinguishing synonyms. Semantic prosody is a special language phenomenon, which refers to a special semantic atmosphere or color formed certain words frequently coexisting with other words with specific semantic features in long-term language use[3]. This semantic atmosphere will have a subtle yet important impact on the meaning of the word, going beyond its literal meaning. Generally speaking, semantic prosody can be divided into three major categories: positive, neutral and negative semantic prosody. Semantic prosody is one of the important discoveries in corpus linguistics. The research on semantic prosody based on corpora has continuously enriched the theory of language, and has become an important research object in corpus linguistics in recent years. Semantic prosody has both evaluative functions and attitudinal meanings, integrating the form, meaning and function of language, and is the development and extension of collocation research[4]. Studying semantic prosody can help us gain a deeper understanding of the semantic features and collocation rules of vocabulary, making it easier and more feasible to distinguish synonyms.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Relevant Research on Colligation

In the 1950s, Firth, who called “the Father of Collocation”, put forward the notion of collocation. Afterwards, Firth conducted researches on English lexical collocations systematically. He finds that the meaning words cannot be studied, and collocation is a linear combination of lexical meanings. Therefore, the meaning of a word should be linked to other words. “Collocation is filled in the whole of the English. Any natural spoken or written English cannot be free

of collocation". Undoubtedly, collocation is one of the most important concepts and research topics in linguistics. What's more, collocation has a close relationship with semantic prosody. From perspective of Sinclair, semantic prosody is "a particular collocational phenomenon". It is clear that collocation is closely related to semantic prosody, so it is necessary to study collocations before further studying semantic prosody[5].

In past few decades, many researchers at home and abroad have conducted a large number of studies on the collocations and colligations of synonyms. Pu's research showed that it is because Chinese English learners fail to understand the collocation and colligation of English vocabulary that results in them cannot master the use of those words[6]. Therefore, he pointed out that English teaching should focus on the teaching of colligations. Xu and Xiong proposed that the colligation can be used for the Contrastive Interlanguage Analysis (CIA) and the analysis of style of courses[7]. Cao compared the two verb synonyms "happen" and "incur", and found that there are great differences in the colligations of these words among reports from the Reuters and the China Daily. She suggested that the colligations of English vocabulary should be included in English dictionaries[8]. Rachmadewi employed a corpus-based approach and investigated the English synonymous "idea" and found out the exact meanings and colligations of these synonyms[9].

To sum up, an extensive number of studies have been dedicated to exploring the colligation of diverse synonyms over time. Concurrently, the outcomes yielded by prior research in this regard are abundant. These findings not only furnish us with valuable colligation knowledge of English vocabulary, but also give a significant boost to the instruction of English vocabulary.

2.2. Semantic Prosody and its Classification

The concept of semantic prosody can be traced back to Firth's statement that "the meaning of a word can be inferred from its companion". Inspired by this idea, Sinclair J conducted a series of studies on word collocation rules by analyzing a large amount of authentic language data. He found that words used in communication always tend to coexist with words that belong to specific grammatical categories and have specific semantic features, and express specific attitudinal meanings, but he had not yet formally proposed the concept of semantic prosody[10]. But later, Louw B formally put forward the concept of semantic prosody in 1993. He pointed out that a certain word or phrase always attracts collocates with the same or similar semantic features, thus forming a special semantic atmosphere within the context, and this is semantic prosody[11]. Since it was formally proposed, domestic and foreign researchers have conducted a large number of related theoretical and applied studies based on corpus.

According to Leng, when learning a new word, it is necessary to know not only the correct pronunciation, spelling and meaning of the word, but also the actual usage of it[12]. The actual usage includes its colligation, collocation and prosodic features and so on. And the word should be learned in context too. Firth has also mentioned that, "You shall know a word by the company it keeps." In English, some words have a strong tendency of attracting or exclusively attracting some certain categories of items, which share the similar or even the same semantic coloring. If these items chronically co-occur with the node words all the time, the node words will

inevitably be endowed with the same kind of semantic coloring and gradually the whole sentence or paragraph will also be permeated with a particular semantic aura. This phenomenon is called semantic prosody.

English learners can basically grasp the meanings of synonyms through looking up dictionaries, but it is still difficult for them to understand the contexts in which words are used. Many words in the language themselves reflect certain attitudes. For example, "politician" usually has a negative meaning, while "statesman" has a positive tendency. Due to this tendency of the language, it is necessary to introduce the concept of semantic prosody. English learners usually find that the true meanings of English words are not only limited to the meanings of the words themselves[13]. In many cases, they will also express positive or negative tendencies through the words they are paired with. Semantic prosody is mainly divided into three kinds: positive semantic prosody, neutral semantic prosody and negative semantic prosody. Positive semantic prosody refers to the frequent combination of words with positive meanings to create a positive semantic atmosphere; negative semantic prosody refers to the frequent co-occurrence with words with negative meanings; neutral semantic prosody refers to the combination of words that have neither obvious positive nor negative tendencies[14]. Semantic prosody can enrich people's understanding of language rules, deepen their understanding of rules for the use of language, and lead people to pay more attention to the basic rule for using words[15].

In addition, semantic prosody also has the characteristics of concealment and extensiveness. The concealment of semantic prosody refers to the fact that semantic prosody is not as intuitive and obvious as the literal meaning of words. It is a potential and implicit semantic feature that can only be perceived and grasped through the analysis and observation of a large number of corpora. For example, the word "cause" carries a negative semantic prosody when it means "causing" some bad results (such as "cause damage", "cause problems"). This negative tendency is not explicitly showed in the word "cause" itself, but is gradually formed in the frequent use of collocating with some specific words. Without a certain amount of corpus analysis, it is not easy to be clearly identified. At the same time, semantic prosody also has extensiveness, that is, it is not limited to a single word or phrase. It can have an impact in a certain context, involving the semantic understanding of multiple related words or even the entire sentence related to it. For example, when describing an event, if a word with a negative semantic prosody is used, the emotional attitude conveyed by the whole sentence will often tend to be negative, even though the other parts of the words may not have obvious negative meanings themselves.

2.3. Relevant Research on Semantic Prosody and Synonyms

Since the concept of semantic prosody was put forward, it has been widely used in the study of the discrimination of synonyms. Foreign scholar Biber conducted research on the registers of using synonyms[16]; Partington A analyzed the semantic prosodies of seven adverbs, including "perfectly", "utterly" and "totally" by analyzing them in corpus. The results showed that "perfectly" has a positive semantic prosody, while the words collocating with "utterly" all have negative meanings, and "totally" has a neutral semantic prosody[17]. Richard and McEnery T et al. took "result" and "cause" as the research objects and analyzed the

characteristics of the semantic prosodies of two groups of synonyms in English and Chinese respectively. The research on lexical semantic prosody abroad covers a wide range of fields and has reference significance for relevant research in China[18].

The research on semantic prosody in China started relatively late, but has developed rapidly. Huo distinguished the meanings and usages of the nouns “event” and “affair” from three aspects: word frequency distribution, collocation and semantic prosody with the help of the BNC Corpus[19]. Zhang and Liu used corpus analysis to identify the collocations, class associations, and semantic differences and characteristics of the verbs “happen” and “occupy”. He proposed that the semantic prosody is crucial for second language learning. It can not only enrich learners’ vocabulary knowledge, but also help them communicate effectively in the second language[1]. Corpus can provide learners with a large amount of authentic and reliable materials for learning. Hou selected synonyms “rather” and “quite” from the BNC corpus, and analyzed the collocation and usage of these synonyms from the aspects of register, node word collocation, and semantic rhyme. After analysis, it was found that the registers in which “rather” and “quite” appear are completely different. “Rather” is often used in formal occasions while “quite” is often used in spoken language, and the semantic prosodies they contain are also completely opposite. “Rather” has a tendency of negative semantic prosody while “quite” shows a positive semantic prosody tendency[19]. However, not all synonyms are worth distinguishing. Only synonyms that are easily confused and closely related to people's lives and work are worth of discrimination[20].

In the field of language teaching, researching semantic prosody can help teachers and students better understand the connotations and usages of vocabulary, and improve the quality and effectiveness of vocabulary teaching. Wang distinguished the adjectives “true” and “real” in terms of syntax and semantic prosody, and other aspects. She pointed out that teachers can use corpora to assist in teaching synonyms[21]. Lu compared the usage of synonyms “*clause*”, “*lead to*”, “*result in/from*” and “*bring about*” in the COCA Corpus and the Corpus of Learner English as a Second Language (CLEC). It was found that there are differences in the collocation rules and semantic features of English synonyms, and Chinese learners have difficulties in distinguishing these features. The basic reason lies in their lack of knowledge about the collocation rules and semantic prosodies of synonyms[22]. These findings have implications for the teaching of synonyms, that is, textbooks and syllabuses should incorporate word collocations, and it is necessary for teachers to use corpora to help students distinguish the differences in collocation rules and semantic prosody features of synonyms during teaching.

Analyzing semantic prosody is also very helpful for translators, which can help them grasp the semantic and emotional differences between the source language and the target language more accurately, and improve the accuracy and fluency of translation. Wang conducted a comparative analysis of the semantic tendencies of the collocates of “*cause*” in the CLEC corpus and the BNC corpus, and found that there are significant differences in the semantic prosodies of Chinese English learners and native speakers when using “*cause*”. Chinese English learners underuse collocates with negative connotations and overuse those with positive connotations[23]. Yang used English-Chinese parallel

corpora and comparable corpora to explore the features of a group of corresponding English-Chinese synonyms in terms of collocation rules and semantic prosodies. The research found that English-Chinese synonyms have different features in terms of semantic prosody, the two exhibit varying degrees of correspondence in collocation, connotative meaning, semantic tendency, semantic rhyme features, and other aspects. She proposed that the correspondence between semantic rhymes is an important factor in determining the correspondence between bilingual synonyms[7]. Yu and Ma also analyzed bilingual synonyms. They used the iWeb corpus and the National Language Commission corpus to analyze the semantic tendency and prosody of “*sympathy*”, “*compassion*” and the Chinese characters for “*TONG QING*” and “*LIAN MIN*” from a cross linguistic perspective. The results indicate that semantic prosody is a key element in distinguishing synonyms and an important factor in determining cross linguistic equivalents[24]. Huang analyzed the words in the corpus from a diachronic perspective. She selected “*absolutely*” as the target word, and through a diachronic collocational construction analysis in multiple corpora, she found that the proportion of “*absolutely*” collocating with positive adjectives is gradually increasing, which has certain reference significance for English learners to use the word accurately in spoken language[25].

In summary, semantic prosody involves the understanding of emotional connotations and can help learners understand the emotional tendency conveyed by the context. In addition, the advanced semantic knowledge contained in semantic prosody can not only cultivate learners’ cultural sensitivity and emotional perception, but also help them accurately select words that are in harmony with the emotional atmosphere of the dialogue to achieve effective communication[26].

3. Research Method

3.1. Research Instrument

This paper selects the COCA corpus (Corpus of Contemporary American English), which is the largest English corpus in the world. It was developed by Professor Mark Davis from Brigham Young University, with a vocabulary of up to 520 million. The COCA corpus has the three fundamental characteristics of a good corpus: size, speed and annotation. Compared with other corpora, the COCA Corpus has the following four characteristics: it is convenient and fast, and can be used free of charge online after online registration; it is large in scale, fast in speed, and the part-of-speech tagging is simple and clear; it has strong timeliness, and the corpus is updated at least twice a year, with 20 million new words added; it covers five types of language materials in the United States in recent decades, including spoken English, novels, magazines, films, newspapers and academic journals, and the distribution of each type of corpus is basically evenly distributed. These advantages are exactly the reasons why the author chooses to use it for research. This paper will mainly discuss and analyze the respective characteristics of the three synonymous degree adverbs “*totally*”, “*completely*” and “*absolutely*” in terms of their frequency distribution, register and collocation, as well as their similarities and differences in actual use.

3.2. Research Question

This paper aims to explore and answer the following research questions: (1) What are the differences in the word

frequency distributions of “*totally*”, “*absolutely*” and “*completely*” in different registers of the COCA corpus? (2) What characteristics do the collocates of synonyms “*totally*”, “*absolutely*” and “*completely*” have in the COCA corpus? (3) What are semantic differences among “*totally*”, “*absolutely*” and “*completely*” in the COCA corpus?

3.3. Research Process

The data for this study was collected from the COCA corpus. Firstly, in the corpus, the node word “*totally*” was entered into the “chart” search interface, with a aim to retrieving the frequency distribution of “*totally*” in various fields within the corpus. The above steps were repeated when retrieving the frequency distributions of the node words “*absolutely*” and “*completely*”.

When retrieving the collocates of “*totally*”, the node word was entered into the “collocates” search interface. Generally speaking, it is appropriate to set the span as -4/+4 (from 4 words to the left of the node word to 4 words to the right of the node word) or -5/+5 (Sinclair, 1974). The collocates of “*totally*” in COCA with MI (Mutual Information Value) ≥ 3 , were extracted. The above steps were repeated when retrieving the collocates of “*completely*” and “*absolutely*”.

Finally, through a comparative analysis of significant collocates, the author analyzed and compared the total word frequency distributions, word frequency distributions in different registers, similarities and differences in lexical collocates, and semantic prosodies of the three degree adverbs.

4. Results

4.1. Analysis of Word Frequency Distribution and Register

Word frequency is a commonly used weighting technique for text retrieval, which is used to evaluate the degree of repetition of a word in a field. Word frequency plays a decisive role in the progressiveness of teaching content. Due to the important role of word frequency, it is necessary for teachers to consider two aspects when teaching vocabulary, namely the total frequency of a certain word appearing in the corpus and its equidistributional in the corpus or the uneven frequency of its use in different registers. In this study, the three synonyms, “*totally*”, “*absolutely*” and “*completely*” were respectively entered into the “List” interface of the COCA corpus to obtain the total frequencies of them in the corpus. The result shows that In the COCA corpus, the frequencies of all four words were relatively high. Among them, the word frequency of “*completely*” was the highest, reaching 103931, followed by “*absolutely*” with a word frequency of 98675, and the word frequency of “*totally*” was the lowest, being 67137. This indicates that in practical applications, people are more inclined to use “*completely*” and “*totally*”. Based on the above conclusion, it can be inferred that in the corpus, the frequency of a word reflects its daily usage, and the higher the frequency, the wider the range of use.

Table 1. Statistics of word frequency distribution in different domains in COCA

synonyms		total freq	BLOG	WEB	TV/M	SPOK	FIC	MAG	NEWS	ACAD
totally	freq	67137	14412	10085	14910	10672	4704	5500	4154	2690
	ratio	100%	21.47%	15.02%	22.21%	15.90%	7.01%	8.19%	6.19%	4.01%
absolutely	freq	98675	15038	11767	14778	38627	5622	5532	5285	2026
	ratio	100%	15.24%	11.93%	14.98%	39.15%	5.70%	5.61%	5.36%	2.53%
completely	freq	103931	22635	19067	11936	12162	11193	12171	7046	7721
	ratio	100%	21.78%	18.35%	11.48%	11.70%	10.77%	11.71%	6.78%	7.43%

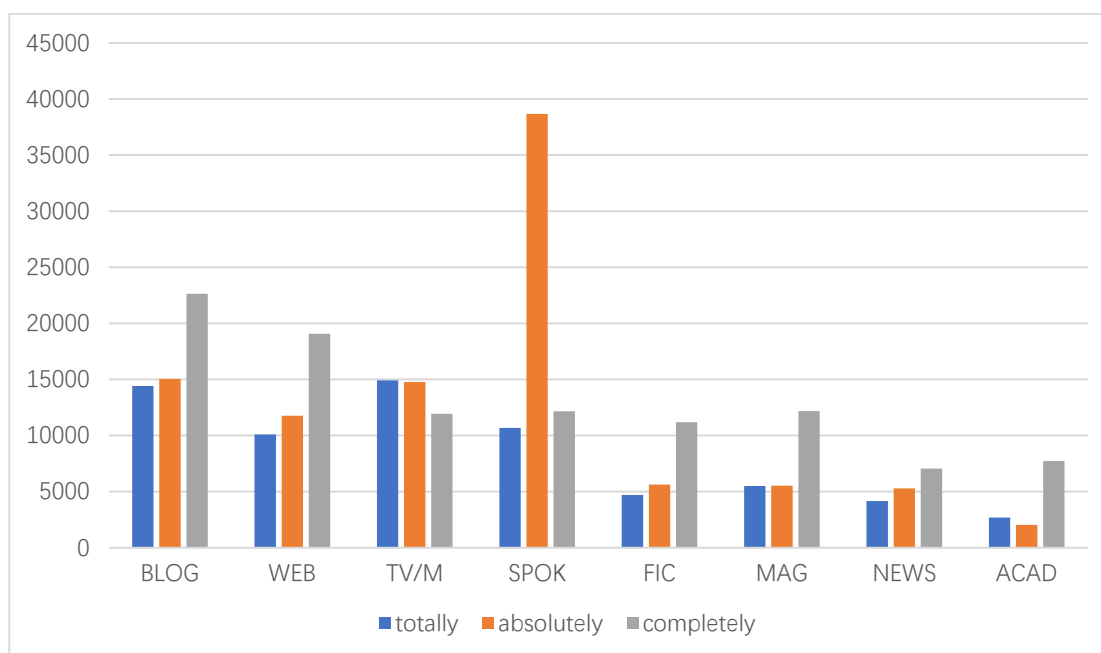


Figure 1. Distribution of synonyms in various domains of the COCA corpus

Register refers to a language variant that arises in actual language activities, due to the needs of communication, or differences in professions and interests, as well as differences

in the context, objects, locations, and topics of speech. It is reflected in different styles of language, such as different stylistic styles and language tones[24]. It can be seen that the

distribution of vocabulary in registers is crucial for language learners. Because it is difficult to choose the correct words in different contexts, and it is even more challenging to choose synonyms. The frequency of synonyms often varies in different domains, and even within the same domain, there may be differences in priority selection[7]. Therefore, calculating the frequency differences of synonyms in different registers is helpful for discrimination, which enables English learners to choose vocabulary that is more in line with the context.

The author entered these four words into the “chart” column of the COCA corpus and got their frequency distribution in blogs, web, movies and TV shows, oral English, novels, magazines, newspapers, and academic articles (see Table 1). In order to enable readers to compare the frequency of “*totally*”, “*absolutely*” and “*completely*” more clearly in the above eight aspects in the COCA Corpus, the author plotted the frequencies of them in these eight registers shown in Table 1 into a bar chart, as shown in Figure 1.

By comparing and analyzing the data in Table 1 and Figure 1, it was found that in terms of usage frequency, in the COCA Corpus, “*totally*”, “*absolutely*” and “*completely*” all appear in various registers. Among them, “*completely*” has the largest frequency of use in the corpus, especially prominent in blogs and webs. This not only indicates that “*completely*” is the most flexible in use across various registers and is closely related to people’s daily lives, but also shows that in online writing and communication, people are more inclined to use this word to strengthen the tone and express meanings precisely. The frequency of use of “*absolutely*” is the highest in spoken language, accounting for 39.15% of the total frequency, which means that “*absolutely*” is often used in informal registers and is the preferred by people in daily communication. The proportion of “*totally*” is relatively high

in movies and television, suggesting that this word is widely used in oral communication scenarios in the film and television field. In the fields of novels, magazines, news and academia, the frequency of use of “*completely*” is higher than that of the other two words, demonstrating that “*completely*” has wide applicability, being suitable not only for informal issues but also for formal styles.

Basing on the conclusions above, it can be inferred that register theory reveals the language change rules, which varies with situational changes. Therefore, in English teaching, teachers should teach vocabulary within multi-level registers, integrate new knowledge in different contexts and create communication and interaction context for students, so as to help them master the rules of using language in different context. In addition, using corpora to analyze word frequencies can also assist textbook compilers in selecting the most commonly used words by native speakers for high-quality textbook compilation.

4.2. Colligation Analysis

Colligation, as an important concept in vocabulary collocation research, refers to the grammatical forms of English grammatical categories and construction patterns of grammatical words that are directly related to the use of vocabulary. The study of lexical collocations is inseparable from the analysis of the colligation patterns of vocabulary.

In the Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary (9th Edition), the common colligations of the three selected words include: Node word + VP / VP + Node word, Node word + AP, Node word + PP, Sentence-initial, Sentence-end. In this study, the five colligation patterns of these three synonyms were retrieved in the COCA respectively, and the following results were got:

Table 2. Typical colligations of *totally*, *absolutely* and *completely* in COCA

types	totally	absolutely	completely
Node word +VP/ VP+ Node word	48%	32%	61%
Node word+ AP	37%	55%	42%
Node word+ PP	8%	5%	3%
Sentence-initial	3%	5%	0%
Sentence-end	4%	4%	4%

According to Table 2, the following conclusions can be drawn: The colligations with higher probabilities of usage for “*totally*” and “*completely*” are “*Node word + VP / VP + Node word*”, while the commonly used colligation for “*absolutely*” is “*Node word + AP*”. Both “*totally*” and “*absolutely*” can appear at the beginning of a sentence. However, among native speakers, “*completely*” is generally not placed at the beginning of a sentence. But all three words can be placed at the end of a sentence.

In order to have a full understanding of the colligation of each word, the five node words and their colligation will be analyzed one by one.

1) totally+ VP/ VP+ totally

(1) *because I think I agree **totally** that people have totally stopped listening to the casualties of the war, the wars...*

(2) *And I **totally** forgot my cell phone at home, so I was wondering if... Unfortunately, ...*

2) totally+ AP

(1) *These new ones have a **totally** different sensibility. The cover girls give off a much older vibe.*

(2) *This is **totally** unacceptable. No, I will sue you, and I will sue your company*

3) totally+ PP

(1) *To be honest, I was **totally** in a daze when I knew the serious situation as a graduate major in English.*

(2) *He and the housekeeper were **totally** in Mr. Mudstones’ power.*

4) Sentence-initial

(1) ***Totally**, I do want a fantastic future.*

(2) ***Totally**, the global environment has changed and toward a bad side which makes us at risk.*

5) Sentence-end

- (1) *As far as I am concerned, I opposite the behavior **totally**.*
- (2) *And these colleges are all governed by the university **totally**.*

And in this Table, it can be concluded that the overall colligation distribution of “totally” in COCA Corpus is not equal. What can be clearly seen is that the type of “totally+ VP/VP+ totally” occupies large proportion in COCA, which principally accounts for 48%, while “totally+ AP” only accounts 37%, which demonstrates that in most instances, the node word *totally* is used to modify verbs or verb phrases. In addition, what deserves to be mentioned is that *totally* also tends to modify adjective phrases. However, the other three types of colligations, including “totally+ PP”, “Sentence-initial”, and “Sentence-end” only take up a small proportion, which account for 8%, 3% and 4% respectively in COCA.

1. absolutely+ VP/ VP+ totally

(1) *I don't love **absolutely** everything about my wife, either, but on balance I love, like,...*

(2) *Emelia's father said absolute power corrupts **absolutely** and Pern had absolute power,...*

2. absolutely+ AP

(1) *Long-term it is **absolutely** necessary for China to become more domestically led and that makes opportunities for others in...*

(2) *It's **absolutely** gorgeous and for a very reasonable price you could rent the place leaving a Garden*

3. absolutely+ PP

(1) *...and also **absolutely** none of it was important, so I could zone out for half of it...*

(2) *As far as I am concerned, I am absolutely in favor of this practice.*

4. Sentence-initial

(1) ***Absolutely**, I hope getting the job means a great development.*

(2) ***Absolutely**, lucky girl as Helen was, she got acquainted with a tender and patient teacher.*

5. Sentence-end

(1) *Sometimes although we cannot receive the knowledge **absolutely**.*

(2) *So they choose to stay in the developed city **absolutely**.*

As is shown above, the colligation “absolutely+ AP” is the most frequently used colligation in the COCA corpus, which accounts for 55% of the whole samples. “absolutely+ VP/VP+ absolutely” appears to be the second frequently used colligation, which shares a proportion of about 32%. The other three types of colligations, including “absolutely+ PP”, “Sentence-initial”, and “Sentence-end” only occupy small

proportion, which account for 5%, 5% and 4% respectively in COCA.

1. completely+ VP/ VP+ totally

(1) *It may ignore **completely** the market price*

(2) *They're not **completely** healed but every day...*

2. completely+ AP

(1) *The monkey character is just hilarious, with **completely** unrelated comments and video links to YouTube.*

(2) *That is **completely** untrue and you know it.*

3. completely+ PP

(1) *This is **completely** contrary to everything they said during the (state approval) process,*

(2) *The color sort of washes out **completely** in the late season, then it becomes this vibrant red.*

4. Sentence-end

(1) *He was able to use speech as well as his own visual personality to pour in people and events **completely**.*

(2) *People spend a few days to clean their houses **completely**.*

What can be concluded from Table 2 and the examples of “completely” is that in the concordance lines of “completely”, “completely+ V/ V+ completely” takes the largest proportion in the four types of colligations, mainly accounting for 61%, followed by “completely+ AP”, which accounts for 42%. And what can also be found is that there is no sample to show that “completely” can be put at the beginning of a sentence. Besides, “completely+ PP” occupies only 3%, which turns out that this node word does not collocate with prepositional phrases frequently.

4.3. Semantic Prosody Analysis

In order to analyze the semantic prosody of the three English degree adverb synonyms in the COCA Corpus, it is necessary to retrieve the significant collocates of the three English degree adverbs first. The concept of collocation was first put forward by Firth, which refers to the “companion relationship” between two words. The mutual information value, namely MI, can be used to judge the collocation strength between the node word and its collocates. When the MI value is greater than 3, it indicates that there is an obvious collocation between words. The larger the MI value is, the closer the relationship between the node word and the collocate is, and the stronger the collocation strength is.

The author retrieved the collocates of the three degree adverbs in the COCA corpus. The typical collocations of these three synonyms were studied by combining the two methods of frequency and MI. The frequency of occurrence of the collocates and the MI were obtained and arranged according to the size of the MI. The 100 significant collocates in the COCA were extracted for analysis.

Table 3 lists the significant collocates of “totally”, “absolutely”, and “completely” in the COCA Corpus. Due to the limited space, only the top 15 significant collocates have been shown in the table.

Table 3. significant collocates of totally/ absolutely/ completely in COCA

NO.	totally		absolutely		completely	
	Collocates	MI	Collocates	MI	Collocates	MI
1	agree	8.63	corrupts	9.85	unrelated	8.01
2	understand	8.13	untrue	7.57	untrue	7.92
3	wrong	8.10	adore	7.49	unprepared	7.79
4	fine	7.85	stunning	6.77	devoid	7.73
5	almost	7.31	adored	6.76	oblivious	7.67
6	lost	7.30	gorgeous	6.75	unaware	7.41
7	cool	7.22	ludicrous	6.56	clueless	7.21
8	honest	7.20	brehtaking	6.49	unacceptable	7.20
9	free	7.12	essential	6.35	ignore	7.15
10	normal	7.06	unacceptable	6.17	healed	7.13
11	unacceptable	7.05	imperative	6.17	irrelevant	6.99
12	forgot	7.03	fabulous	6.12	unnecessary	6.46
13	worth	7.01	applied	6.12	useless	6.44
14	awesome	6.97	applying	6.12	ignored	6.41
15	dependent	6.82	devastating	6.1	destroyed	6.33

What have been shown above is the significant collocates of the three English degree adverb synonyms. And according to the colligations and significant collocates of each of the five words, it can be concluded that the five words have something in common, which is that totally, completely and absolutely collocates with verb phrases and adjective phrases in a frequent way. There are two node words, including totally and absolutely, which could be placed not only at the beginning of a sentence, but also the end of a sentence. However, completely only appear at the end of a sentence. Besides, it is obvious that in the COCA corpus, there are a number of significant collocates of these three degree adverbs,

which can be classified into three semantic parts. If the collocates express the positive meaning, so the node word belongs is equipped with positive semantic prosody, while they express in an adverse way, the node word possesses the negative semantic prosody. If the collocates show without clear emotional colors the node word must be neutral.

By analyzing the data from the one hundred significant collocates of the five English degree adverb synonyms in COCA corpus, these collocates can be categorized into positive, negative and neutral ones, and they are specifically listed in the following table.

Table 4. Semantic Prosody Distribution of totally/ completely/ absolutely in COCA

	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Totally	22%	10%	68%
Completely	20%	13%	67%
Absolutely	48%	5%	47%

This table is related to the semantic prosody distribution of “*totally*”, “*completely*”, “*absolutely*” in the COCA corpus. It is clearly shown that the semantic prosodies of the three node words are different. According to the table, among the significant collocates of “*totally*” and “*completely*”, the proportion of those with negative meanings is the largest, accounting for 68% and 67% respectively, exceeding half of the proportion. Moreover, the proportions of positive meanings of these two words are also relatively close, being 22% and 20% respectively. This indicates that it turns out that “*totally*” and “*completely*” are more likely to be accompanied by negative semantic prosodies, such as “*disagree*”, “*false*”, “*inappropriate*”, and “*useless*”, “*destroyed*”, “*unacceptable*”. However, among the significant collocates of “*absolutely*”, the proportions of positive and negative meanings are relatively close. This shows that “*absolutely*” is more likely to be accompanied by mixed semantic prosodies.

5. Discussion

The data for this study is sourced from the COCA corpus. The study focuses on the three synonyms, “*totally*”, “*absolutely*” and “*completely*”, and conducts a multidimensional comparative analysis of their frequency and distribution in different registers, colligation patterns, collocational differences and semantic prosody. following conclusions are drawn from the study: (1) By comparing the

usage frequencies of the three degree adverbs in COCA, it can be predicted that the most commonly used word by native English speakers is “*completely*”. (2) According to their distributions in different register, it can be concluded that “*completely*” is often used in formal styles, while “*absolutely*” is frequently used in spoken language. (3) Through retrieving different colligation patterns, it can be obtained that the most common colligation patterns for this group of words are “*Node word + VP / VP + Node word*” and “*Node word + AP*”. By retrieving colligations and collocations, different collocational ways of words can be predicted, and based on the collocates with relatively high MI, the three synonyms can be qualitatively identified. Research shows that the semantic prosodies of “*totally*” and “*completely*” tend to be negative, while the semantic prosody of “*absolutely*” is relatively neutral.

6. Conclusion

According to the above conclusions, this study found that the objectivity, extensiveness and intuitiveness of the corpus can effectively assist English teaching. The Curriculum Standards require students to construct different lexical semantic networks according to the parts of speech, commonly used collocations of words and thematic content, accumulate lexical chunks, expand vocabulary, and strengthen language sense and transfer their ability to use words in a large number of language learning activities,

ultimately achieving internalization of words [27]. The corpus can provide a large amount of authentic and natural language materials. Therefore, the word collocations from the corpus can provide a reliable basis for vocabulary teaching. The corpus provides a new perspective for English learners to learn words. It is not limited to the meanings of words themselves. It also enables learners to pay more attention to their collocations and contexts, and memorize new words in context, which can help them easier understand and remember words. Through the discrimination of synonyms in the corpus, the exploration ability of learners for vocabulary has been cultivated, which helps English as a second language learners to reduce the confusion in the use of synonyms to a certain extent.

The teaching implications can be divided into the following points: (1) Teachers can use corpus to guide students to have a deeper understanding of the semantics and usages of synonyms, help them accurately understand and master these words, and at the same time, encourage them to use high-frequency-used words in actual contexts, so as to avoid situations such as excessive use of low-level words and insufficient use of advanced words. (2) In language teaching, the explanation of the meaning of words cannot be separated from their registers. Teachers should deeply understand the pronunciation, form, meaning, collocations and colligations of words. Therefore, teachers should create different context for students, and help them master the different rules of integrating language into context. (3) Using corpus teaching can promote the transformation of the roles of teachers and students in the classroom. Under the guidance of teachers, students can correctly use corpora to study, which can effectively change the one-way input teaching mode of teachers and develop students' self-regulated learning ability.

There's no doubt that this study also has some limitations: Firstly, the author's semantic judgment of collocations has a certain degree of subjectivity, and some significant collocations only rely on the author's intuitive judgment. Secondly, this study is only limited to the English corpus and does not compare it with the Chinese Learner Corpus. In view of this limitation, the author suggests that future studies can conduct a comparative study of synonyms from a cross-language perspective.

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