

Understanding Metaphor Collocation and its Patterns

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ABSTRACT

Research on collocations published in English occasionally mentions “metaphorical collocations”, yet these studies rarely offer any specific definitions for metaphorical collocations. Since metaphorical collocations are an intriguing area for investigation, this paper aims to gain a deeper understanding of the current understanding of metaphorical collocation and analyse its common patterns. The methodology involves a review of the past literature on metaphor collocation across different domains, nevertheless the review is limited to the research that were published in English language. In view of the definition of metaphorical collocation, it was found that there was no concluded definition of metaphor collocation by the researchers of the reviewed literature. Nevertheless, most of the researchers agreed that at least one of the words in the word combination should be used metaphorically, while some agreed that idiom and metonymy should also be considered as metaphorical collocation. In terms of the patterns of metaphorical collocations, it was also discovered that the most common syntactic structure of the metaphor collocations identified in the examined past literature was Adj. + N, followed by V + N, while the least common syntactic pattern is V + Adv. The findings provide a better understanding of the patterns and variations in the use of metaphorical language and the impact of context on metaphor collocation. The implications of these findings are significant for the development of teaching materials, language resources, and communication strategies that reflect the diversity and complexity of metaphorical language in different contexts.

Keywords: metaphor; collocation; metaphorical collocation; literature review

INTRODUCTION

Metaphor and collocation are two prominent linguistic phenomena that play crucial roles in shaping language use and comprehension. Metaphor is traditionally defined as “a figure of speech in which one thing is compared with another by saying that one is the other” [7]. This concept is characterised by five commonly accepted features: it is a linguistic phenomenon, serves artistic and rhetorical purposes, is based on resemblance between entities, involves a conscious and deliberate use of language, and is considered non-essential to communication [7]. The modern understanding of metaphor aligns with the cognitive linguistics perspective, where metaphor is defined as “understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another” [7]. For example, the phrase “she carried a heavy burden of responsibility” is derived from the metaphor responsibility is a physical weight. This is known as a conceptual metaphor, which follows the structure conceptual domain A is conceptual domain B. It is important to distinguish conceptual metaphors from metaphorical linguistic expressions, which are the specific phrases that emerge from these underlying metaphors.

In contrast to metaphor, collocation lacks a universally accepted definition [15] due to the existence of multiple theoretical perspectives on this syntagmatic relationship [18]. Collocation refers to the natural co-occurrence of words within a specific context, highlighting the systematic relationships between words and contributing to the overall coherence of discourse. Collocation studies follow two main approaches: the frequency-based and phraseological approaches [11]. The frequency-based approach analyses word co-occurrence statistically [20]. The phraseological approach, used in lexicography and language teaching, defines collocation as a structured syntagmatic relationship [19], where a semantically independent base determines the meaning of its collocate [4].

The fusion of these two linguistic phenomena gives rise to the intriguing field of “metaphor collocation”, where metaphorical expressions tend to collocate with particular words or phrases to create new meaning and associations. Understanding the patterns and dynamics of metaphor collocation is essential for comprehending how language users interpret and convey figurative language in diverse communicative contexts. While considerable research has been conducted on metaphor and collocation independently, the intersection of these phenomena in metaphor collocation remains relatively unexplored [15]. The lack of a comprehensive and unified understanding of metaphor collocation hinders our ability to grasp its intricate patterns and implications in natural language usage. Interestingly, certain researchers investigate metaphors, figurative language, collocations, and vocabulary but refer to metaphorical collocations without offering a clear definition of what they understand by this term [15]. Therefore, the overarching goal of this review paper is to shed light on the multifaceted nature of metaphor collocation and uncover its patterns in linguistic discourse. To achieve this, the following research questions were formulated:

What is the current definition of metaphorical collocation?

What are the common patterns of metaphor collocation across different domains?

By answering these research questions, the findings of the study may contribute to the growing body of knowledge on metaphor collocation and advance the understanding of how metaphor and collocation intertwine to shape language use and interpretation. This review paper will serve as a comprehensive guide for scholars, linguists, and language enthusiasts interested in exploring the intricacies of metaphor collocation and its broader implications for communication and cognition.

METHODOLOGY

A literature search was employed to identify relevant studies on metaphor collocation. The search was conducted using academic databases such as Google Scholar and Academia. This approach allowed the researchers to gather a broad range of scholarly articles, conference papers, and dissertations related to the examined topic.

To ensure the selection of relevant studies, inclusion criteria were established. The following criteria were applied during the study selection process:

Publication Date: Research articles published between 2018 and 2023 were included in the review. This time frame was chosen to focus on recent contributions to the field of metaphor collocation and to capture the latest developments in the area.

Focus on Metaphor Collocation: Only publications explicitly focusing on metaphor collocation were considered for inclusion. Studies that explored other aspects of metaphor or collocation without specifically addressing their intersection were excluded from the review.

Empirical Analysis: Publications that included empirical analysis of data, such as samples or corpora, were included in the review. This criterion aimed to ensure that the selected studies provided concrete insights into the usage and patterns of metaphor collocation, rather than being solely theoretical or conceptual papers.

Language: Only publications written in the English language were included in the review. This decision was made to maintain consistency and coherence in the analysis and synthesis of the reviewed literature.

A search was made using academic databases like Google Scholar and Academia, with the aim to find scientific works related to metaphorical collocations. The search encompassed titles, abstracts, and text, yielding 28 relevant results. Of the 28 retrieved studies, 16 were excluded primarily due to their limited focus on the intersection of metaphor and collocation. Many of these addressed metaphors in isolation or examined collocations without considering figurative language. Future reviews may benefit from a broader lens that includes metaphor-related idiomatic collocations or figurative phraseological units. Data collection involved a thorough examination of the selected past literature to extract relevant information regarding the definition of

metaphor collocation and its patterns as highlighted by the authors of the papers. Specific attention was given to understanding the conceptualisations and interpretations of metaphor collocation in different contexts.

Through this review of literature, the study aims to provide a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge on metaphor collocation and identify key themes, patterns, and gaps in the field. The selected studies will be critically evaluated and synthesised to contribute to a nuanced understanding of metaphor collocation and its implications for language use and communication.

Although the current review is restricted to English-language publications, it is worth noting that metaphorical collocations are found in a wide range of languages. Several studies in the reference list, such as Reference [14] on English and Turkish political collocations and Reference [22] on taste metaphors in Polish and English, highlight the potential richness of cross-linguistic comparisons. Future reviews should expand the scope to include such studies in non-English languages to develop a more global and culturally diverse understanding of metaphorical collocation.

FINDINGS

In this section, the key findings from the systematic review of the literature on metaphor collocation and its patterns are presented. The exploration of past literature has revealed an insight into the current definitions and conceptualisations of metaphorical collocation and offers a nuanced understanding of how language users employ this phenomenon in diverse communicative contexts. Additionally, the review of past literature also reveals the common syntactic patterns of metaphor collocation identified by the researchers of this field. Table 1 summarises the authors, definition of metaphor collocation, syntactic structures of metaphor collocation, and the examples of metaphor collocation identified in the selected past studies.

Table I Review of Past Literature Related to Metaphorical Collocation

Studies	Definition of metaphor collocation	Syntactic structures	Examples
[18]	One of the two words in a collocation is employed in a metaphorical sense.	Adj + N	“sunny smile”
[2]	Specific collocations where modulation is employed to convey the figurative or metaphorical meaning using literal expressions or formulations.	N + V Adj + N N + N	“helping the wind change” “a fair playing field” “a window of opportunity”
[6]	Specific linguistic expression, like the denotation for colours, that is used metaphorically to symbolise or represent something else.	Adj + N	“green book”
[12]	Specific collocations that are challenging for translators due to their idiomatic features, and they are also referred to as “idiomatic collocations” because of the figurative meanings they carry.	Adj + N	“easy prey”
[13]	The metaphorical collocations in the dataset are termed ‘semantically burdensome’. They also share similarities with idioms, as once learned, the prominence of the collocation is equally significant as that of the individual collocates when considered independently [16].	V + N Adj + N	“damage one’s image” “bright future”
[21]	Consider idioms and metaphorical collocations as equivalent	V + Prep + N	“fall from the sky”
[22]	Did not mention any definition.	Adj + N	“sweet sorrow”
[23]	Did not mention any definition.	Adj + N V + Adv	“high pressure” “think highly”

[3]	Metaphorical collocations are a type of collocation that cannot be understood by simply combining the meanings of their individual words as they are less transparent and often influenced by conceptual metaphors.	Adj + N	“keen understanding” is derived from the conceptual metaphor KNOWLEDGE IS A KNIFE
[1]	Specific type of lexical collocations where the base word retains its literal meaning while the collocate takes on a metaphorical meaning, offering potential for cross-language comparison and universal formation patterns.	N + N N + Adj N + V	No example given
[17]	The source domain in a collocation acquires the characteristics commonly associated with tangible physical objects.	V + N V + Prep + N Adj + N N + V V + Prep + N	“lose the scent” “picked up the scent” “pungent aroma” “scent drifts” “filled with scent”
[14]	A combination of words where one word retains its literal meaning while the other functions as a metaphor, altering the meaning of the first word, yet her finding also includes collocations that the entire collocation are used metaphorically, both components are metaphors, and one component that has a metonymic component.	N + N Adj + N	“election marathon” “political suicide”

Defining Metaphorical Collocation

Based on the findings from the reviewed literature, it is evident that there is no single universally accepted definition of metaphorical collocation. The authors of two past studies (i.e., [22], [23]) did not mention any definition with regards to metaphorical collocation. Meanwhile, other authors provided a variety of definitions which are not universally alike. the use of word combinations. Rather than reiterating the lack of consensus, this review identifies five key definitional dimensions emerging from the literature: (1) figurative balance, (2) idiomaticity, (3) source domain embodiment, (4) conceptual transparency, and (5) metonymic overlap. These distinctions allow for a more granular understanding of how scholars approach metaphorical collocations.

1) Figurative or Metaphorical Use: Almost all definitions acknowledge that metaphorical collocations involve the figurative or metaphorical use of at least one of the words in a collocation (e.g., [1], [2], [18]). Several definitions point out that in metaphorical collocations, one word retains its literal meaning while the other takes on a metaphorical or non-literal meaning. This duality between literal and metaphorical components is a common theme. For instance, “sunny smile” is a combination between a word that is used literally (i.e., smile) and another word that is used metaphorically (i.e., sunny) [18]. The word ‘sunny’ means bright and pleasant and promotes a feeling of cheer, not necessarily related to the bright sunlight. Meanwhile, Reference [6] indicates that metaphor collocation can also be both words of the word combination being used metaphorically like “green book”. The phrase does not necessarily refer to a book that is green in colour, but it is a term to refer to a document that is either a thorough guide or report provided by government agencies and bodies [5]. This is a common thread among the definitions, highlighting the central role of metaphor in these linguistic expressions.

2) Consideration of Idioms: Several definitions mention that metaphorical collocations can be challenging for language users or translators due to their idiomatic or non-literal features (e.g., [12], [13]). They often carry meanings that cannot be deduced by analysing the individual words in isolation. For instance, “easy prey” is an idiom which means “someone who can easily be deceived or harmed” [9] and these words cannot be understood by their individual meaning. Reference [12] refers collocations with idiomatic features as “idiomatic collocations”, while Reference [21] equates idioms and metaphorical collocations, suggesting that they are equivalent. Hence, following these definitions, word combinations with idiomatic features should also be considered as metaphorical collocations.

3) Specificity of the Source Domain: One definition highlights the acquisition of characteristics associated with tangible physical objects as a defining feature of metaphorical collocations, focusing on the source domain [17]. For example, the words such as ‘lose’, ‘picked up’, ‘drifts’, and ‘filled with’ are all relating to characteristics of tangible physical objects, but they are used with an intangible object like ‘scent’. Even though other definitions do not emphasise this aspect, this notion indeed highlights the use of figurative language as abstract object is described to possess the quality of physical entity such as a human or a container. Therefore, this perspective should also be taken into consideration when analysing metaphorical collocations.

4) Degree of Transparency: Reference [3] stresses that metaphorical collocations are less transparent and cannot be understood by simply combining the meanings of their individual words. They further explained that the words are frequently influenced by conceptual metaphors. For example, the word ‘keen’ in the collocation of “keen understanding” is derived from the conceptual metaphor “KNOWLEDGE IS A KNIFE” since the adjective does not only mean intense or focused, but also sharp [3]. This degree of opacity is not explicitly mentioned in all other definitions but should also be considered when analysing metaphorical collocations.

5) Metonymic Components: Besides agreeing that metaphor collocation can be a combination of words with either one of them or both function as metaphor, Reference [14] extends the definition to include cases where one component has a metonymic aspect. For example, “political suicide” is not related to an act of intentionally causing one’s own death, but more of a concept involving an action that “you do that ruins your good position in politics” [10]. This perspective broadens the scope beyond strict metaphors.

Overall, while there is a degree of overlap and shared characteristics among the definitions of metaphorical collocation, there are also variations in the specific nuances and criteria highlighted by different researchers. These differences reflect the multifaceted nature of metaphorical collocations and the diverse perspectives from which they can be approached in linguistic research.

Identifying the Syntactic Structures of Metaphorical Collocation

Metaphorical collocations exhibit a rich array of syntactic structures and grammatical patterns that contribute to the figurative depth and expressiveness of language. These patterns provide insights into how metaphorical meanings are constructed and conveyed through word combinations. Based on the analysis made, it was revealed that most of the identified syntactic patterns have at least a Noun (N) as the base of the collocation. It is also noted that most of the words in the metaphor collocations are lexical words that are mostly Noun (N), Verb (V), and Adjective (Adj). There is only one syntactic pattern that has an Adverb (Adv) in the collocation. It is also interesting to note that there is one non-lexical word that in the identified syntactic patterns, i.e., preposition. There are generally six types of syntactic patterns identified in the examined past literature: a) Adj + N / N + Adj, b) V + N / N + V, c) V + Prep. + N, d) N + N, e) N + Prep + N, and f) V + Adv.

1) Adjective + Noun (Adj+N) and Noun + Adjective (N+Adj): This syntactic pattern is one of the most frequently observed structures in metaphorical collocations, as highlighted in past studies. It involves the combination of an adjective with a noun or, in some cases, a noun followed by an adjective, forming expressions that evoke vivid imagery and abstract associations. Examples such as “sunny smile”, “green book”, and “bright future” illustrate how adjectives imbue ordinary nouns with metaphorical significance. In “sunny smile”, the adjective sunny metaphorically conveys warmth and happiness, while “bright future” suggests optimism and promise. Similarly, “green book” can signify environmental themes or novice status, depending on context. These collocations enrich language by establishing visual and emotional connections, enhancing expressiveness and interpretative depth.

2) Verb + Noun (V+N) and Noun + Verb (N+Verb): In this pattern, verbs and nouns come together to form metaphorical collocations that represent actions or states in a figurative manner. “Damage one’s image” exemplifies how the metaphorical transformation of verbs infuses the collocation with a sense of harm or negative impact. This pattern is effective in conveying abstract concepts through concrete action-related terms. Although no specific examples were provided, the Noun + Verb pattern is another way in which metaphorical collocations can be structured. In such cases, a noun and a verb combine to convey metaphorical meanings, potentially involving actions or processes that are metaphorically associated with the noun. For instance, “time flies” illustrates the metaphorical concept of time as a fleeting entity.

3) Verb + Preposition + Noun (V+Prep+N): Metaphorical collocations following the Verb + Preposition + Noun structure often convey movement, change, or causality, with the preposition serving to refine the relationship between the verb and the noun. This pattern frequently appears in figurative language to express abstract concepts through dynamic or directional imagery. For example, “fall from the sky” metaphorically signifies a sudden and often dramatic descent, extending beyond its literal meaning to describe unforeseen events or failures. The verb fall evokes a sense of loss or decline, while the preposition from establishes an origin point, reinforcing the notion of an abrupt or uncontrollable shift. Such constructions add a vivid, action-oriented dimension to metaphorical expressions, making abstract ideas more tangible and impactful.

4) Noun + Noun (N+N): This syntactic pattern consists of a noun modified by another noun, forming a compound structure where the first noun typically functions as an attributive modifier. In metaphorical collocations, this structure often conveys abstract or figurative meanings beyond the literal interpretation of the individual nouns. For instance, Reference [14] identifies the collocation “election marathon”, where marathon metaphorically represents an extended and arduous process rather than its conventional meaning as a long-distance race. Such noun-noun constructions are frequently employed in political and media discourse to encapsulate complex events or experiences in a concise yet evocative manner.

5) Noun + Preposition + Noun (N+Prep+N): Metaphorical collocations following the Noun + Preposition + Noun structure often establish conceptual relationships between abstract ideas using prepositions. These constructions introduce nuanced and layered meanings by linking two nouns in a way that extends beyond their literal interpretation. For instance, the collocation “a window of opportunity” illustrates how the preposition of functions to metaphorically frame opportunity as something visible yet fleeting, akin to a literal window that opens and closes. Such patterns frequently appear in both everyday language and specialised discourse, where prepositions play a crucial role in shaping conceptual metaphors by expressing spatial, temporal, or causal relationships.

6) Verb + Adverb (V+Adv): Among the syntactic patterns examined in past studies, the Verb + Adverb (V + Adv) structure is the least commonly observed. However, it plays a crucial role in shaping metaphorical collocations by modifying the intensity, manner, or degree of an action. Adverbs in this pattern enhance the figurative meaning of the verb, often reinforcing abstract or evaluative concepts. For instance, “think highly” exemplifies how the adverb highly metaphorically elevates the act of thinking, conveying a strong sense of admiration or esteem rather than a literal spatial height. Such constructions contribute to the expressive richness of language by adding nuance to metaphorical interpretations.

These syntactic and grammatical patterns collectively demonstrate the versatility of metaphorical collocations in language use. They enable the conveyance of abstract concepts, emotions, and experiences through tangible and relatable linguistic structures. By exploring and understanding these patterns, valuable insights into the mechanisms by which metaphor enriches our language can be gained, facilitating more expressive and nuanced communication.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that metaphorical collocation lacks a universally accepted definition, with existing studies either omitting its definition ([22], [23]) or offering varied interpretations. This inconsistency suggests that metaphorical collocation remains a fluid and evolving concept, shaped by different theoretical orientations and methodological approaches.

Despite these definitional variations, a shared conceptual foundation emerges. Most scholars agree that metaphorical collocations consist of word combinations where at least one element carries a figurative meaning ([1], [2], [18]). The extent of figurative involvement, however, differs across studies. Some scholars emphasise the interplay between literal and metaphorical meanings (e.g., sunny smile), whereas others extend the definition to include cases where both components are metaphorical (e.g., green book) [6].

Another key debate concerns the degree of transparency in metaphorical collocations. While some studies view these expressions as relatively accessible due to their dual literal-metaphorical structure, others highlight

their opacity, arguing that metaphorical collocations often rely on conceptual metaphors that obscure their meaning [3]. This perspective aligns with CMT (Conceptual Metaphor Theory), where metaphorical expressions are understood through underlying conceptual mappings [8]. Additionally, metonymic influences have been acknowledged in certain metaphorical collocations [14], suggesting that metaphor and metonymy often co-exist, further complicating definitional boundaries.

These findings highlight the multidimensional nature of metaphorical collocations and the need for a more systematic and unified approach in defining them. The lack of consensus highlights an opportunity for future research to refine and standardise definitions, particularly by incorporating cross-linguistic perspectives and examining how metaphorical collocations function across different discourse types. The findings reveal that metaphorical collocations predominantly revolve around Nouns (N), with Adjectives (Adj), Verbs (V), and Preposition (Prep) playing key roles in constructing figurative meanings. This aligns with previous studies (e.g., [14], [17]), which highlight nouns as the primary carriers of metaphorical meaning. However, the presence of prepositions and adverbs, though less frequent, introduces additional layers of abstraction in meaning. Six distinct syntactic patterns emerge:

Adj + N / N + Adj – This is the most frequently observed pattern, where adjectives metaphorically modify nouns (e.g., sunny smile, bright future). The predominance of this pattern suggests that metaphorical collocations frequently rely on descriptive imagery, reinforcing prior findings [2].

V + N / N + V – This structure assigns metaphorical meaning to actions or states (e.g., time flies, damage one's image), supporting the notion that verbs play a crucial role in shaping abstract concepts through dynamic metaphorical representations [3].

V + Prep + N – The incorporation of prepositions (e.g., fall from the sky) highlights how spatial and directional metaphors structure abstract ideas, consistent with Conceptual Metaphor Theory [8].

N + N – Noun-noun structures (e.g., election marathon) demonstrate compound metaphor formation, a pattern frequently observed in political and media discourse [14].

N + Prep + N – This pattern (e.g., window of opportunity) further emphasises how prepositions contribute to conceptual framing in metaphorical language, reinforcing previous observations on the role of relational structures in figurative expressions [17].

V + Adv – The least frequent pattern, verb-adverb structures (e.g., think highly), indicate a modulation of metaphorical intensity, adding evaluative depth to the meaning [3].

These patterns suggest that metaphorical collocations are not random but structured, reinforcing systematic relationships between syntax and figurative meaning. The findings contribute to existing research by demonstrating that while most metaphorical collocations centre around nouns, the presence of prepositions and adverbs underscores the multilayered nature of metaphorical language. Future studies could further explore cross-linguistic variations in these syntactic structures, particularly in languages with different syntactic constraints and metaphorical mappings.

From a cross-linguistic perspective, emerging research (e.g., [14], [22]) suggests that metaphorical collocation patterns may vary across languages depending on cultural conceptualisations and syntactic conventions. For example, Reference [14] compares political metaphorical collocations in English and Turkish, revealing differing figurative associations and structures. Similarly, Reference [22] explores how basic taste metaphors manifest differently in Polish and English, suggesting that universal metaphor patterns may still exhibit language-specific expressions. These insights open promising avenues for multilingual studies on metaphorical collocation.

CONCLUSION

Metaphorical collocations, with their intricate syntactic structures and grammatical patterns, play a crucial role in shaping meaning within language and thought. This study has identified key syntactic patterns that

characterise metaphorical collocations, offering valuable insights for corpus-based metaphor research. Given that corpus-based studies often involve the large-scale identification and extraction of metaphorical expressions, these syntactic patterns serve as essential guidelines for annotation and tagging, enabling systematic and consistent identification across different texts. By incorporating these patterns, researchers can refine search queries and improve the accuracy of metaphor detection and classification, thereby enhancing the overall reliability of corpus-based metaphor analysis.

Beyond identification, the syntactic structures of metaphorical collocations provide a framework for semantic role analysis, allowing researchers to examine how words function within these expressions—whether an adjective modifies a noun, a verb governs a noun, or a preposition establishes a conceptual link. This analysis is particularly relevant for uncovering the underlying conceptual mappings that shape metaphorical meaning. Additionally, understanding the distribution and frequency of these syntactic patterns across different corpora offers insights into language evolution, revealing how metaphorical expressions shift over time and across discourse genres.

From a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural perspective, the identified patterns offer a foundation for comparing metaphorical collocations across languages and cultures. By applying these syntactic structures to multilingual corpora, researchers can explore universal versus culture-specific metaphorical expressions, shedding light on the cognitive and cultural dimensions of metaphor. Furthermore, the findings have practical implications for natural language processing (NLP), where computational tools for metaphor detection can be trained to recognise these grammatical structures, facilitating automated metaphor analysis at a larger scale.

In language education, these findings can inform the design of targeted instructional materials for teaching figurative language and metaphorical vocabulary. Teachers can use syntactic pattern awareness (e.g., Adj+N or V+N structures) to guide learners in recognising and producing metaphorical expressions more effectively. Additionally, translation instructors and curriculum developers may benefit from integrating metaphorical collocations into lessons on idiomaticity, semantic opacity, and cultural nuance.

This review has synthesised recent definitions and syntactic patterns of metaphorical collocations across English-language literature. It identifies a lack of definitional consensus but highlights recurring themes such as figurative duality, idiomaticity, and conceptual metaphors. Six primary syntactic patterns were extracted from the literature—Adj+N, V+N, V+Prep+N, N+N, N+Prep+N, and V+Adv—revealing systematic structures that underpin metaphorical expressions.

Future research should expand the scope to include cross-linguistic studies to uncover universal versus language-specific features of metaphorical collocation. Additionally, empirical classroom-based studies could explore how learners understand and acquire such expressions, informing pedagogical strategies for vocabulary and figurative language instruction. The integration of metaphorical collocation analysis into curriculum design, teacher education, and learner corpora offers valuable directions for both theoretical and applied linguistics.

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