Collocational Properties of Singular and Plural Nouns in English: A Problem for Learners and Lexicographers

Brian Poole

Abstract

As has been noted by Hoey (2002), the singular and plural forms of certain English nouns – such as 'consequence' – show sharply different patterns of lexical collocation. The present paper offers details of a small-scale corpus-based investigation into four English nouns ('affair', 'balance', 'consequence' and 'damage') and their singular and plural forms. Differences in collocation and semantics are noted between the two forms of each noun. A brief summary of the dictionary treatment of all four nouns is offered. Finally, the paper asks how learners of English as a second or foreign language can gain sufficient awareness of the collocational and semantic differences between singular and plural forms of the same noun when condensed dictionary entries are only able to offer partial information. Despite the paucity of hard empirical evidence showing that independent and teacher-directed learning using corpus data or computer concordances can lead to enhanced lexical competence, it is argued that concordance-based study offers the most plausible avenue towards native-like awareness of individual word-forms and of their semantic and collocational characteristics.

Introduction

Hoey (2002) has noted that certain English nouns – such as 'consequence' – show radically different patterns of lexical collocation when their singular and plural forms are compared. The present paper seeks to provide further examples of the same phenomenon, using data obtained from the British National Corpus, and to discuss the implications for the teaching and learning of English and for ESL/EFL lexicography.

The present paper will focus on four abstract nouns: affair; balance; consequence; and damage. It will be argued that close study of the collocational behaviour of these four nouns (in singular and plural forms) provides corroborative evidence for Hoey's assertion. Although the present paper is clearly limited in scope, and its conclusions are necessarily tentative in nature, implications for the teaching/learning process and for ESL/EFL lexicography will be briefly examined in a final section.

Hoey's claim re-examined

Although the main focus of Hoey's paper (Hoey 2002) lay elsewhere, he made in passing the point that singular and plural forms of the same English noun can show markedly different collocational behaviour. He used as an example the noun 'consequence' and argued that its plural form ('consequences') tends to collocate readily with preceding adjectives with a negative meaning, such as 'adverse', 'appalling' or 'disastrous', whereas the singular form ('consequence') does not. Where a given lexical word tends to occur in a wider semantic context which is, for instance, negative or positive, this is often referred to as its 'semantic prosody' (Hunston [2002: 141]).

Below, data extracted from the British National Corpus (see References) using the Simple Search facility is presented and summarized. It tends to confirm Hoey's claim about the semantic prosody of the word 'consequences'.

Lexical Combination	Instances via BNC Simple Search
adverse consequence	0
adverse consequences	42
appalling consequence	0
appalling consequences	3
disastrous consequence	4
disastrous consequences	51

Table 1: The frequency of selected adjective-noun combinations involving 'consequence' and 'consequences'.

As can be seen above, the three adjectives collocate a total of 96 times with 'consequences', but only a total of 4 times with 'consequence'. Representative examples of each of the four observed lexical combinations are:

> By late November some 800,000 Yemeni workers had returned home from Saudi Arabia, with adverse consequences for Yemen's vital remittance income. (HL4 5623)[11]
>
> It engendered greater hostility within those same localities and had appalling consequences elsewhere. (CS6 1168)
>
> This can have disastrous consequences for growing horses who need calcium for bone formation. (ASH 1280)
>
> 250,000 works of art ... are rotting away in various stores as a result of the disastrous consequence of the BKR scheme. (EBS 269)

Although only three preceding adjectives have been investigated here, the tabulated results seem to provide quite strong support for Hoey's assertion. To what extent is this phenomenon observable in the collocational behaviour of other English abstract nouns? The cases of 'affair', 'balance' and 'damage' will be examined.

The singular and plural forms of three further abstract nouns investigated

The singular and plural forms of each of the three abstract nouns will be considered in turn, alphabetically.

- 'affair' and 'affairs'

Scrutiny of a random selection of fifty instances of the word-form 'affair' from the BNC reveals that its most frequent senses, informally worded by the present writer, are as follows:

a. a romantic or sexual relationship, often outside marriage
b. a thing or event – 'affair' as a noun with a rather unspecific meaning and informal feel

[11] Strings of letters and numbers such as this after examples indicate the source text in the British National Corpus

c. a brouhaha, a political or media controversy – related to sense b, but more specific

The first of these senses is easily exemplified:

His secretary dreams about having an affair with her boss. (CAJ 1493)
The affair ended with the child's birth. (HLK 2029)
"They're having an affair, or they were…." (H9H 3243)

The 'thing or event' sense occurs in examples such as:

The evening was an enjoyable affair. (ACM 19)
Dinner is a three-course affair. (AMD 824)
The chapel was only a single-storey affair. (BN6 231)

Finally, the 'brouhaha' sense is shown in such examples as:

The Rushdie affair also emphasized that the composition of a society is not homogeneous. (BMH 266)
George Wigg's political hatreds…..were to surface intensely with regard to the Profumo affair. (FPN 211)
When problems such as those created by the Maxwell affair…. come to light, that committee and the Department of Trade and Industry could operate together. (HHX 8281)

Quite a number of preceding adjectives occur with 'affair' (for example, 'enjoyable', 'drab', 'acrimonious', 'disgraceful' and 'bland') but none appears more than once in the data. The most notable multi-word combination is 'to have an affair', which occurs three times in the fifty BNC examples.

When examples of the word-form 'affairs' are examined it is immediately apparent that there are numerous examples such as the following:

Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (HHV 3627)
Minister for Political Affairs (HKS 1147)
Minister for Foreign Affairs (HL4 2743)
Secretary of State for African Affairs (HL7 29)
Minister for Finance and Economic Affairs (HLD 1142)

Of the fifty example sentences, 29 contain lexical combinations of this type, either in the job title of a person (as above) or of a body ('Directorate of Warsaw Pact Affairs' [CMT 1052]). Although such a finding may stem from the nature of the corpus – for example there may be a high proportion of political or newspaper texts within it – and although fifty examples can never constitute enough evidence to draw cast-iron conclusions, it seems possible to suggest that this is the most common use or sense of the word-form 'affairs'. It will be noted that it is a sense or use which is not seen in examples of 'affair'.

Other lexical combinations are noteworthy:

He spent his life...guiding the affairs of the Church with great discretion. (AE6 129)
Terenure College....have another Kiwi...to look after their coaching affairs (CB3 1556)
An executor should be someone you trust and who is responsible enough to handle your affairs. (CJ9 43)

This sense of 'affairs' is closely related to the previous one. Indeed it could be argued that it is essentially the same sense but occurring in less formal contexts: in both 'coaching affairs' and 'foreign affairs' the word 'affairs' means something like 'matters', but the second phrase denotes a concept with a weightier pragmatic meaning.

Just as with 'affair', the plural form 'affairs' occurs with the meaning 'a romantic or sexual relationship, often outside marriage':

She has affairs with other men. (G12 1642)

Similarly, 'affairs' occurs (like 'affair') with a rather unspecific meaning covering 'things or events':

Early concerts were hectic affairs with guitar strings repeatedly snapping. (AT1 530)

However the brouhaha sense ('the Rushdie affair', 'the Profumo affair') is not apparent in the BNC data for 'affairs', although a wider corpus search might reveal instances.

There is one multi-word unit which occurs with great frequency for 'affairs' and which does not occur at all with 'affair'. That is exemplified below:

This is the state of affairs at a normal sports centre. (BNP 855)
To the non-expert this is an extraordinary state of affairs. (CS7 911)
But this happy state of affairs did not last for long. (JOU 754)

The phrase 'state of affairs' is often preceded by an evaluative adjective such as 'happy' (above), 'sad', 'pathetic', 'extraordinary' or 'lamentable'. Other adjectives preceding 'state of affairs' include 'general', 'normal' and 'current'.

- 'balance' and 'balances'

One hundred instances of 'balance' (as a noun) were obtained from the BNC Simple Search facility by entering both 'a balance' (50 items) and 'the balance' (50 items) as node. The following were the most striking collocational and semantic features observed in this data:

Firstly, 'balance' occurs frequently with the sense 'equilibrium between real or metaphorical weights or forces'. When it does so, it combines (in both active and passive constructions) with verbs such as 'tip', 'restore' and 'strike'. See examples below:

...this undoubtedly tipped the balance.... (AE4 1290)
The balance has tipped.... (AR9 1293)
...you must shuffle along the board to restore the balance. (BNK 1315)
...it would be sensible to restore the balance to that which it was before. (J3W 203)
...a balance must be struck between team spirit and individual rewards. (ABE 2108)

The phrase 'get the balance right' also occurs (with variations of verb tense and agreement) several times in the data:

Do you think the world will ever get the balance right feeding the starving? (KBK 7015)
Have we really got the balance right? (EW5 1801)

The word 'between' co-occurs frequently with 'balance'. It is present in about 20% of cases and appears to occur most often when 'balance' is preceded by the indefinite article. This is illustrated below:

Particularly there is a balance between courage and cowardice.... (A69 623)
We needed to find a balance between them. (BOH 1065)
But this is not representative of the balance between them. (CRX 1088)

The word 'balance' often occurs in economics, finance, accounting or banking contexts in phrases such as 'balance sheet' or 'balance of payments'. In the first case it could be argued that 'balance' is acting as a pre-modifier and is therefore not a noun but an adjective. However, one can also take the position that 'balance sheet' is a compound noun, or that nouns can and do act as pre-modifiers ('coffee bar', 'hand cream'). Examples are:

...the budget and the balance of payments indicate that a substantial tightening of fiscal policy is required. (K59 1321)
...the balance of payments will be closer to equilibrium. (AG 451)
...a man who would never open the family books or provide them with a balance sheet (CR8 496)

The phrase 'balance of power' occurs several times, and it is noticeable that in the data 'balances of power' does not occur:

Shultz stressed the need to maintain a balance of power against Soviet might. (GVK 275)
Labour's complex power brokerage.....might tip the balance of power.... (CHU 184)
....power, the balance of power, and the national interest. (EDD 444)

Fifty examples of 'balances' (as a noun, preceded by 'the') were obtained from the BNC. From this evidence, it appears that although both 'balance' and 'balances' occur in the context of economics, finance or banking, overall 'balances' occurs more often:

This is a list of the balances extracted from the ledger….. (EA9 1846)
You can find out the balances on your Saver Plus and Current Account….. (B27 371)
…the sum of the balances in the ledger account…. (FYS 1430)

In such examples, the co-text characteristically displays a range of semantically related words, quite often beyond the 'span' (four words immediately before and immediately after the node) that lexicologists most often focus on. Such words include 'statement', 'profit', 'loss', 'surplus' and 'deficit'. Here is an example, with 'balances' and semantically related words underlined:

The capital element of future rentals is treated as a liability and the interest element is charged to profit and loss account over the period of the leases in proportion to the balances outstanding. (HRX 225)

Both 'balance' and 'balances' (but particularly the latter) have a tendency to occur in sentences loaded with other technical or semi-technical words from the broad semantic field of the financial world.

Verbs which co-occur more than once with 'balances' are 'show', 'extract', and 'find out'. None of these verbs is seen in co-occurrence with 'balance', although 'find' occurs. The word 'balances' occurs much more often than 'balance' in the data with the meaning of 'a piece of equipment to measure the weight of something'. Examples are:

….the small size of the balances they….used to weigh small quantities… (CFK 642)
…many of the balances are associated with grave-goods. (CFK 646)

However, as these and other examples appear to come from the same text on archaeology it is doubtful that this finding would be replicated in a wider search.

- 'damage' and 'damages'

Fifty examples for each of 'damage' and 'damages' preceded by 'the' were extracted from the BNC. The major findings were as follows:

Most strikingly, 'damage' occurs with the verb 'do', often in passive constructions or reduced relative clauses. Here are some examples:

….but the damage had been done (A8C 291)
….but the damage had already been done (ABC 1419)
The Emperor…..tried to repair the damage done to the Entente. (ANR 980)
….the damage done to the vineyards during the Battle of the Marne was negligible….. (C8M 394)

Note that 'damages' never occurs in the data closely collocating with 'do' in this manner.

The noun 'damage' is often followed by the verb 'cause', as in the following examples:

Kenneth Powell, Architecture Correspondent, assesses the damage caused.... (AKH 224)

The damage caused by the Cultural Revolution.... (CG0 483)

The....referendum...was postponed after the damage caused to the islands (HL0 3808)

Verbs which most often precede 'damage' (in verb plus direct object collocations) include 'repair', 'assess' and 'estimate'. The phrase 'the extent of the damage' occurs several times. Neither 'do', 'cause', repair', 'assess', 'estimate' nor 'the extent of' present themselves in the data for the plural noun 'damages'.

The word 'damages' occurs in legal contexts where a lay definition 'financial compensation' would be appropriate. In the BNC data virtually all examples are of this type.

Lawyers will not be able to take an American-style slice of the damages... (A96 512)

...the damages awarded by the judge... (B2P 1007)

...the damages recoverable by the plaintiff... (FSS 1003)

The word 'damages' occurs in texts which contain other legal lexical items such as 'lawyers', 'plaintiff', 'defendant', 'libel', 'pecuniary loss' and 'statutory limitation'. Verbs that commonly collocate with 'damages' include 'assess', 'award', and 'pay'. Examples follow:

The judge then went on to assess the damages at the figure of $200,000. (FDT 115)

...the damages awarded for past pecuniary loss..... (J6X 264)

Cogedipresse was also ordered to pay half the damages... (B2P 1007)

Where 'damages' occurs in the data with any other meaning than 'financial compensation,' it appears to be a case of non-standard usage, perhaps taken from a transcript of spoken English:

Everybody overeats...and that's the bit that causes the damages. (KDJ 837)

As is well known, spoken English displays greater dialectal variation than does written English, and in speech, furthermore, performance errors are more common than in writing. Examples such as the one above must arise from one or other of these factors.

Two important final points can be made here about 'damages'. Firstly, although it almost always occurs with the meaning of 'financial compensation', the singular noun 'damage' never does so in the data. However, a second issue is that because this is so, lexicographers would 'damage' and 'damages' as two entirely separate noun headwords. That is 'damage' and 'damages' would have separate dictionary entries.

It is now possible to summarize the findings of this small-scale study of singular and plural noun-forms in English and to see how ESL/EFL dictionaries and teachers and learners of English can best come to terms with these phenomena.

Findings in summary

Some of the collocational and semantic contrasts between singular and plural forms of the nouns 'affair', 'balance', 'consequence' and 'damage' are tabulated below. It should once again be emphasized that these findings are based on limited data.

affair	**affairs**
occurs in the 'brouhaha' sense ('the Rushdie affair')	rarely occurs in the 'brouhaha' sense
does not occur in job titles or the titles of public bodies	occurs frequently in job titles and the titles of public bodies ('Minister/Ministry of Foreign Affairs')
does not occur in combination with the noun 'state'	occurs frequently in combination with the noun 'state' in the phrase 'state of affairs'

Table 2: Collocational and semantic contrasts between 'affair' and 'affairs'

balance	**balances**
collocates with 'tip', 'restore' and 'strike' in verb + noun combinations	collocates much less frequently with 'tip', 'restore' and 'strike' in verb + noun combinations
frequent phrase 'get the balance right'	'get the balances right' far less frequent
frequent phrase 'balance of power'	'balances of power' far less frequent
'between' collocates frequently with 'balance'	'between' collocates much less frequently with 'balances'
'balance' occurs occasionally in financial contexts	'balances' occurs more frequently in financial contexts and especially in accountancy contexts

Table 3: Collocational and semantic contrasts between 'balance' and 'balances'

For brief data on 'consequence' and 'consequences' see Table 1 earlier.

damage	**damages**
collocates strongly with 'do' and 'cause'	Very rarely collocates with 'do' and 'cause'
collocates with verbs such as 'repair', 'assess' and 'estimate'	collocates infrequently with 'repair'; can occur with 'assess' and 'estimate' (legal texts)
occurs in the phrase 'extent of the damage'	rarely occurs in the phrase 'extent of the damages'
occasionally found in legal texts	frequently found in legal texts

Table 4: Collocational and semantic contrasts between 'damage' and 'damages'

These broad general findings can now be used to answer two questions. Firstly how successfully do dictionaries present these distinctions for learners? And secondly where dictionaries fail to provide full support, how can ESL/EFL teachers and learners make good the deficit?

A brief investigation of dictionary entries

For the purposes of this paper two dictionaries have been used: *Collins Dictionary of the English Language* and *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (see References). The former (abbreviated hereafter as CDEL) is a dictionary primarily intended for native-speakers of English. It was compiled before lexicographers had access to computer corpora of English. The latter (abbreviated to CIDE) is primarily aimed at intermediate and advanced users of English as a second or foreign language. It was produced with the aid of corpus evidence from the Cambridge Language Survey (100 million words, both written and spoken). CDEL is essentially a dictionary of British English; CIDE draws on a corpus in which British and United States English are equally represented.

These two dictionaries have been selected because together they represent pre- and post-corpus lexicography and cover both native and non-native speakers of English.

CDEL	CIDE
'**affair**' and '**affairs**' as separate headwords; 'brouhaha' sense, no example.	Four entries for '**affair**': 'matter'; 'relationship'; 'event'; 'thing'. No '**affairs**'
gives two examples for '**affairs**': 'his affairs were in disorder' and 'current affairs'. No explicit mention of job titles or titles of public bodies.	an example includes the phrase 'an expert in South American **affairs**' but nothing in the definitions about job titles or titles of public bodies. No 'brouhaha' example.
gives sixteen senses for the noun '**balance**'; notes collocation of 'weigh', 'strike' and 'hang'; gives 'balance of payments', 'balance of power' and 'balance of trade' as separate entries.	Three separate entries for the noun '**balance**': 'equality'; 'weighing device'; 'amount'. Highlights collocates: redress; strike; upset + delicate; on/off. Phrases: balance of power/payments/trade.
'between' is not mentioned at all regarding '**balance**'. No separate entry for '**balances**'	highlights the word 'between' ('strike a **balance** between'). No separate '**balances**'
six senses listed for '**consequence**'; notes that 'consequence' can mean 'an unpleasant result' especially in the phrase 'take the consequences'.	defines '**consequence**' as 'an often bad or inconvenient result of....action or situation. Exemplifies with 'as a consequence' and 'disastrous consequences'.
'**consequences**' occurs as a separate entry but only for the game (stories on folded paper)	No separate entry for '**consequences**'. Game not mentioned. Examples include: suffer/take the consequences.
'**damage**' and '**damages**' have separate headwords; only example for 'damage' is 'What's the damage?' (informally meaning 'How much?' in a shop or restaurant); 'damages' defined in its legal sense – no example given.	'**damage**' and '**damages**' have separate headwords; damage shown to collocate with 'do', 'brain' and 'limitation (exercise)'; phrase 'what's the damage?'; damages shown to collocate with 'pay' and 'award'.

The following points should be noted:

- CIDE gives more examples and more information about collocations and (semi-) fixed phrases than does CDEL
- Neither dictionary handles the contrasting collocational behaviour of 'consequence' and 'consequences' as Hoey (2002) appears to advocate
- Neither dictionary explicitly points to the 'brouhaha' sense of 'affair' nor uses examples such as 'the Iran-Contra affair'
- Neither dictionary points out the phrase 'state of affairs' (although this may occur under 'state')
- Neither dictionary points out the phrase 'get the balance right'

Implications for learners and lexicographers

It is comforting to note that CIDE - a modern, corpus-based dictionary for ESL/EFL learners – clearly offers greater support to its readers than does CDEL, a pre-corpus dictionary intended for native–speakers of English. There can actually be very few serious complaints about the way CIDE defines and exemplifies our four nouns. It is never possible to provide comprehensive information about a word in a condensed dictionary entry. Hence any quibbles that have been raised on the basis of limited BNC data should not in any way detract from the strong reputation of CIDE since its first publication.

Lexicographers today are in the happy position of working with corpus data rather than with selected and hand-written quotations derived from literary texts or examples they have produced from their own intuitive grasp of English. Yet the central problem remains the same as it was for eminent lexicographers of the past such as Samuel Johnson or James Murray: how to present the most important facts about each headword in the most economical and efficient way. There is always a fundamental tension between the need to present the facts and the need to be brief. Compromises have to be made; the whole story can never be told.

It can be argued therefore that teachers, and learners above an intermediate level, need to be fully aware of the potential of corpus data to offer the bigger picture about words and phrases. Dictionaries attempt to present the essentials, but in order to climb beyond the 'intermediate plateau' reached by many learners to the heights required, for instance, for English-medium academic study, training in how to use corpora like BNC or the emerging American National Corpus (see References) is highly desirable. Once learners find out about how to access and use such corpora, many of them spend several hours a week searching with the support of tutor supervision and worksheets, or as independent learners with their own agendas. Few systematic studies have yet been made of language learning through corpus access, but Cobb (1997) offers a small-scale investigation.

To sum up, Hoey (2002) makes a valid point when he suggests that singular and plural nouns have different patterns of collocation. A related issue is that nouns may have different patterns of collocation when preceded by the definite or indefinite article: compare for example 'a balance' with 'the balance'. Yet it is unreasonable to expect any dictionary to include each tiny nuance, each quirk of usage, each feature of collocation. As has been pointed out by many applied linguists of stature, lexical competence and 'knowing a word' are highly complex, multi-faceted concepts. A

good dictionary can do a little to foster high levels of lexical competence in learners; guided or informed access to a corpus such as BNC can potentially do much more.

References

American National Corpus. Available: http://americannationalcorpus.org/

British National Corpus Simple Search facility. Available: http://sara.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/lookup.html

Cobb, T. (1997) Is there any measurable learning from hands-on concordancing? *System 25* (3), 301-315.

Hanks, P. (ed) (1979) *Collins Dictionary of the English Language*, Glasgow: William Collins.

Hoey, M. (2002*) In the dictionary: the changing relationship between lexicographer and reader*, a paper presented at the 13th World Congress of Applied Linguistics, AILA 2002, Singapore.

Hunston, S. (2002) *Corpora in applied linguistics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Procter, P. (ed) (1995) *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.