

3 Collocation (word partners)

A What is collocation?

If you want to use a word naturally, you need to learn the other words that often go with it (word partners). These can be very different from language to language. For example, in English we say:

I missed the bus (= I didn't catch the bus) [~~NOT I lost the bus~~]

She made a mistake [~~NOT she did a mistake~~]

A heavy smoker (= someone who smokes a lot) [~~NOT a strong smoker or a big smoker~~]

It was a serious illness [~~NOT a big illness or a strong illness~~]

B Verb + noun

The meaning of many of these examples may be clear, but did you know these verbs and nouns go together? Is it the same or different in your language?

start the car (= turn on the engine) start a family (= think about having your first child)

tell a story tell the truth (≠ tell a lie)

tell a joke run a shop/company (= manage/control it)

get on a bus (≠ get off) get in(to) a car (≠ get out (of) a car)

miss a person (= be unhappy because that person is not there)

miss a lesson (= when you don't come to a lesson)

C Adjective + noun

Common adjectives often combine with a wide range of nouns.

a soft drink (= non-alcoholic drink)

a soft voice (≠ a loud voice)

dry wine (≠ sweet wine)

dry weather (≠ wet weather)

strong coffee (≠ weak coffee)

a strong accent (≠ a slight accent)

hard work (= hard physically or mentally)

a great success (= very successful)

heavy traffic (= a lot of cars)

heavy rain (= raining a lot)

Look at some of these phrases in example sentences.

I can't understand his English because he has such a **strong** accent.

It was **hard** work organising the conference, but I think it was a **great** success.

You always get **heavy** traffic during the rush hour.

D Adverb + adjective

In these examples, all the adverbs mean **very**, but we choose to use them with certain adjectives. (You could still use **very** in all of these examples if you wish.)

I was **terribly** sorry to hear about your accident.

He's **highly** unlikely to come now. (= I'm almost sure he will not come)

She is **fully** aware of the problem. (= she knows all about the problem)

It is **vital**ly important that you make a note of common collocations in your notebook.

E Collocation in dictionaries

All good dictionaries now include examples of common collocations but they do it in different ways: sometimes they are in **bold print** after the definition; sometimes in *italics* after the definition; and sometimes in the definition and examples. (See Unit 3, Section B.)