

## Notes on Word Clusters in EVM (lexical / grammatical collocations)

"You shall know a word by the company it keeps"

*John R. Firth, British linguist  
(1890-1960)*

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### What is a word-cluster?

A word-cluster (also called "collocation") is two or more words that often go together. These combinations just sound "right" [✓] to a native English speaker, who uses them all the time. On the other hand, other combinations may be unnatural and just sound "wrong" [✗] – even if the meaning would seem the same.

Compare, for example, the following:

- *active ingredient*<sup>1</sup> [✓] vs *active principle* [✗]
- *avian influenza* or *bird flu* [✓] vs *avian flu* or *bird influenza* [✗]
- *beef cattle*<sup>2</sup> [✓] vs *meat cattle* [✗]
- *blood vessels* [✓] vs *bloody vessels* [✗], vs *vessels of blood* [✗]
- *bone marrow* [✓] vs *bony marrow* [✗] vs *osseus marrow* [✗]
- *cardiac* /'kɑ:diæk/ *arrest* [✓] vs *heart arrest*
- *cardiac muscle* [✓] vs *heart muscle* [✗]
- *cardiac output*<sup>3</sup> [✓] vs *heart output* [✗]
- *dairy cow*<sup>4</sup> [✓] vs *milk cow* [✗]
- *dairy products*<sup>5</sup> [✓] vs *milk products* [✗]
- *death rate* or *mortality rate* or *fatality rate* [✓] vs *rate of death* or *rate of mortality* [✗] or *rate of fatality* [✗]

<sup>1</sup> Any ingredient that provides biologically active or other direct effect in the diagnosis, cure, mitigation, treatment, or prevention of disease or to affect the structure or any function of the body of humans or animals. **Equivalent in Italian:** "principio attivo".

<sup>2</sup> **Equivalent in Italian:** "bovini da carne", "bovini allevati per la macellazione".

<sup>3</sup> The blood pumped by the heart. **Equivalent in Italian:** "gittata cardiaca".

<sup>4</sup> **Equivalent in Italian:** "vacca da latte".

<sup>5</sup> They are also called "dairies". **Equivalent in Italian:** "prodotti caseari", "latticini".

- *diabetes mellitus* [✓] vs *mellitus diabetes* [✗]
- *foodborne disease or illness* [✓] vs *disease/illness of food origin* [✗]
- *heart attack*<sup>6</sup> [✓] vs *cardiac attack* [✗]
- *heart failure*<sup>7</sup> [✓] vs *cardiac failure* [✗]
- *herd immunity or herd effect*<sup>8</sup> [✓] vs *immunity of herd or flock immunity* [✗]
- "The hepatitis C virus (HCV) is the *infective agent* that causes Hepatitis C" [✓] vs "The hepatitis C virus (HCV) is the *infectious agent* that causes Hepatitis C" [✗]
- *humane*<sup>9</sup> /hju:'meɪn/ *society*<sup>10</sup> [✓] vs *human society* [✗]
- *humane* /hju:'meɪn/ *treatment*<sup>11</sup> [✓] vs *human treatment* [✗]
- *infectious disease/illness* [✓] vs *infective disease/illness* [✗]

### IMPORTANT REMARKS!

Look at the differences between the qualifiers *infectious* and *infective*:

- **infectious** refers to the process by which a disease may occur – therefore, *infectious diseases* are "caused by pathogenic microorganisms, such as bacteria, viruses, parasites or fungi"; such diseases "can be spread, directly or indirectly, from one person to another. Zoonotic diseases are infectious diseases of animals that can cause disease when transmitted to humans"<sup>12</sup>;
- on the contrary, **infective** refers to any agent "producing or capable of producing or transmitting infection"<sup>13</sup>: for example, the hepatitis C virus (HCV) is the infective agent that causes Hepatitis C; the bacterium *Clostridium tetani*, commonly found in soil, saliva, dust, and manure, is the infective agent that causes Tetanus; and so on.

<sup>6</sup> **Equivalents in Italian:** "infarto".

<sup>7</sup> **Equivalents in Italian:** "arresto cardiaco".

<sup>8</sup> **Herd immunity** or **herd effect** (less commonly called "community immunity", "population immunity", or "social immunity") is a form of indirect protection from infectious disease that occurs when a large percentage of a population has become *immune* to an infection, whether through previous infections or *vaccination*, thereby providing a measure of protection for individuals who are not immune. **Equivalents in Italian:** "immunità di gregge", "immunità di gruppo", "immunità di branco".

<sup>9</sup> Compare the qualifiers **humane** ("being kind towards people and animals by making sure that they do not suffer more than is necessary") and **human** /'hju:mən/ ("[only before noun] of or connected with people rather than animals, machines or gods) – the latter being used in clusters such as *human body*, *human brain*, *human remains*, *human chain*, and so on (see <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/> and <https://www.wordreference.com/>).

<sup>10</sup> **Equivalent in Italian:** "organizzazione umanitaria".

<sup>11</sup> **Equivalent in Italian:** "trattamento umano".

<sup>12</sup> See [https://www.who.int/topics/infectious\\_diseases/en/](https://www.who.int/topics/infectious_diseases/en/)

<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/infective> for further examples.

Moreover, **transmissible diseases** are transmitted from one individual to another by infection, through physical contact, and can be divided into:

**1. infectious diseases:** that is, caused by pathogenic microorganisms, such as bacteria, viruses, parasites or fungi; such diseases can be spread, directly or indirectly, from one person to another. Zoonotic diseases are infectious diseases of animals that can cause disease when transmitted to humans.

**1.1 contagious infectious disease:** for example, rabies is a transmissible infectious disease caused by lyssaviruses. It is spread when an infected animal bites or scratches a human or other animal;

**1.2 non-contagious infectious diseases:** also called **non-communicable diseases (NCDs)**, they are not transmissible directly from one person to another. For example, the bacterium *Clostridium tetani* that causes Tetanus, enters through a break in the skin such as a cut or puncture wound by a contaminated object, and produce toxins that interfere with normal muscle contractions. The disease, however, does not spread between people.

Such non-contagious infections also include all those diseases requiring a vector (for example: bloodsucking insects such as an infected female *Anopheles* mosquito that carries malaria; needles, syringes and so on) to be spread; if such a vector does not exist the infection lies in the host and cannot be transmitted.

**2. non-infectious diseases** – that is, diseases that are not caused by micro-organisms:

**2.1 contagious non-infectious disease:** even if the disease is not caused by micro-organisms, the contagion occurs due to a close contact between an affected individual and a healthy one;

**2.2 non-contagious non-infectious diseases:** a typical example is given by haemophilia because it is mostly an inherited genetic disorder that impairs the body's ability to make blood clots – a process needed to stop bleeding.

- *laboratory mice* or *lab mice* [✓] vs *mice of laboratory* [✗]
- *meat-and-bone meal* [✓] vs *bone-and-meat meal* [✗] or *animal-borne flour* [✗]
- *mild flu* [✓] vs *slight flu* [✗]
- *mild fever* [✓] vs *slight flu* or *light flu* [✗]
- *morbidity rate*<sup>14</sup> [✓] vs *spreading rate* [✗]

<sup>14</sup> The **morbidity rate** is the frequency or proportion with which a disease appears in a population. **Equivalents in Italian:** "tasso di morbilità", "tasso di diffusione".

- *risk factors* [✓] vs *factors of risk* [✗]
- *slight stomach ache* [✓] vs *mild stomach ache* [✗]
- *spinal cord* [✓] vs *spinal marrow* [✗]
- *stem cells* [✓] vs *staminal cells* [✗]
- *the onset of an illness/a disease* [✓] vs *the beginning of an illness/a disease* [✗] or *the start of an illness/a disease* [✗]
- *thorough*<sup>15</sup> *examination* [✓] vs *total examination* [✗] or *complete examination* [✗]
- *trace elements*<sup>16</sup> [✓] vs *oligoelements* [✗]

## How to learn word-clusters

- ✧ be aware of word-clusters and try to recognize them when you read or hear them;
- ✧ treat word-clusters as single blocks of language, think of them and learn them as individual blocks;
- ✧ when you learn a new word, write down other words that collocate with it (e.g. *to spread* + *easily* / + *gradually* / + *slowly* / + *quickly*);
- ✧ learn word-clusters in groups that work for you – e.g. you could learn them **by topic** or **by a particular word**  
⇒⇒⇒⇒ see Handout 1, Unit 1, a.y. 2025/2026
- ✧ you can find information on word-clusters (often in bold) in any good dictionary – both monolingual and bilingual – as well as on [www.wordreference.com](http://www.wordreference.com);
- ✧ you can also use specialised dictionaries of word-clusters, such as the *Oxford Collocations Dictionary*, the *MacMillan*

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A synonym is **prevalence** – i.e, the number of disease cases *present* in a particular population at a given time; whereas **incidence** is the number of new cases that *develop* during a specified time period.

Prevalence answers "How many people have this disease right now?" or "How many people have had this disease during this time period?". Incidence answers "How many people acquired the disease during a specified time period?".

<sup>15</sup> /'θʌrə/ in British English or /'θɜːrəʊ/ in American English (see the item "thorough" at <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com>).

<sup>16</sup> Also called **minor elements**, it is a chemical element whose concentration (or other measure of amount) is very low (a "trace amount"). They are classified into two groups: essential and non-essential. **Equivalent in Italian**: "oligoelementi".

*Collocations Dictionary*, as well as browsing through [www.ozdic.com](http://www.ozdic.com)

## The different types of word-clusters

There are two main types of word-clusters made from combinations of items from the various word-classes – being they lexical or grammatical. Some of the most common types are:

### lexical collocations

- ✧ **adv + adj** ➔ *highly contagious, highly infectious, ...*
- ✧ **adj + g.n. or p.n.** ➔ *Veterinary Medicine; veterinary surgeon (in BrE only); domesticated animals; wild fauna / wildlife<sup>17</sup> ...*

### The colorful world of biotechnology

A color code is used as a handy method of classifying the different applications in biotechnology. **White biotechnology** uses the tools of nature like bacteria, yeast cells or enzymes in industrial production. Products made using white biotechnology have been enriching human life for thousands of years, particularly in the area of food: micro-organisms are essential to products such as wine, bread, beer, cheese and yoghurt. Scientists now also use tools derived from nature to produce basic or specialist chemicals. **Red biotechnology**, by analogy with human blood, is currently the largest field and refers to the development of new therapeutic and diagnostic processes. Drugs such as antibodies and hormones are well-known examples for which modern genetic research lays the scientific foundations. **Green biotechnology** takes its name from the green pigment in leaves, chlorophyll. This form of biotechnology involves breeding new plant varieties. Molecular methods are used to produce improved crop plants and higher-yielding varieties, for example. **Blue biotechnology** focuses on marine organisms. Scientists are particularly fascinated by thermostable enzymes found in deep-sea bacteria that live close to hot underwater volcanoes.

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<sup>17</sup> **Equivalents in Italian:** "fauna selvatica", "animali selvatici".

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. "The bacterial workshop", [www.research.bayer.com/indaziflam](http://www.research.bayer.com/indaziflam)

- ✧ **n + n** ➔ *booster shot or follow-up injection*<sup>19</sup>; *crop protection products*<sup>20</sup>; *game meat*<sup>21</sup>, *game bird*<sup>22</sup>, *research facilities, health facility; pocket pets; maintenance host; prescription drug; reservoir host ...*
- ✧ **n + v** ➔ *BSE affected hundreds of cattle in that area; ...*
- ✧ **v + n** ➔ *to be in labo(u)r and to get into labo(u)r*<sup>23</sup>; *to catch or to get a cold / the flu / malaria / pneumonia ...; to contract a disease (formal); to develop cancer / diabetes / arthritis ...; to get a booster*<sup>24</sup>; *to have an attack of asthma / bronchitis / hay fever ...; to trigger an immune response, ...*
- ✧ **v + adj** ➔ *to become active, to get active; to become ill or sick; to get ill or sick; to become infected, to get infected; to become trapped up; to fall ill ...*
- ✧ **v + adv** ➔ *to spread easily; to further investigate ...*

### grammatical collocations

- ✧ **v + preposition** ➔ *to suffer **from**; to depend **on**; to focus **on**; to deal **with**; to die **for** or **of**; to feed **on**; to be diagnosed **with**; to be named **after**; to refer **to**; to result **in** and to lead **to** (= to cause); to result **from** (= to be caused by); to transfer **into** ... and all the other so-called prepositional and phrasal verbs!*
- ✧ **adj. + preposition** ➔ *consistent **with***<sup>25</sup>; *dependent **on**; interested **in**; responsible **for** + something; responsible **of** + somebody; ...*
- ✧ **linking expressions** ➔ *according to / in accordance with / on the basis of; as well as; as well; such as; due to / because of; in addition to; in order to; on the contrary; as of; so far / to date; "that is," ...*
- ✧ **definite article + certain toponyms** ➔ *the US, the USA, the United States; the UK, the United Kingdom; the Atlantic Ocean; the Pacific; the Mediterranean; the Suez Canal; ...*
- ✧ **definite article + certain institutions** ➔ *the World Health Organization; the British Veterinary Association, ...*
- ✧ **definite article in superlative expressions** ➔ *the most effective; the healthiest; ...*

<sup>19</sup> **Equivalents in Italian:** "richiamo vaccinale mediante iniezione", "richiamo".

<sup>20</sup> **Equivalent in Italian:** "fitofarmaci".

<sup>21</sup> **Equivalents in Italian:** "selvaggina", "cacciagione". For the names of the various types of meat, see figure no. 1 below.

<sup>22</sup> **Equivalent in Italian:** "selvaggina di penna".

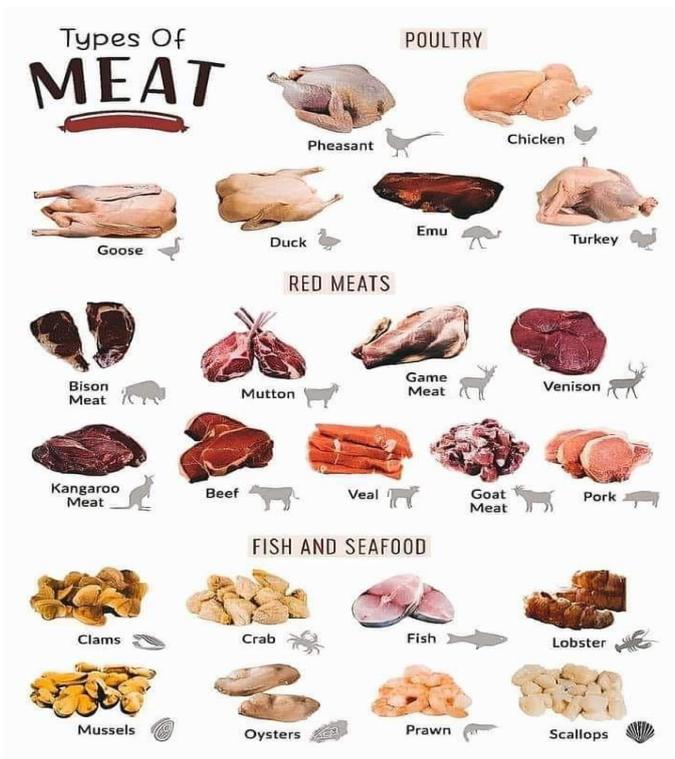
<sup>23</sup> **Equivalents in Italian:** "essere in travaglio" and "entrare in travaglio".

<sup>24</sup> **Equivalent in Italian:** "fare un richiamo (vaccinale)".

<sup>25</sup> **Equivalents in Italian:** "(essere) compatibile con".

✧ and, of course, **the plural formation of U-nouns** → a word of advice; a body of evidence; a surgery of spaying; a DNA strand or a strand of DNA...

⇒⇒⇒⇒ for further details on plural formation of U-nouns, see unit 2, a.y. 2025/2026



picture no. 1/2026



pictures no. 2 and 3/2026



pictures no. 4 and 5/2026