
PATTERNS AND HOW TO FIND THEM

1. WHAT IS A PATTERN?

The idea of *patterns* was pioneered by JOHN SINCLAIR (Sinclair 1991), and elaborated by HUNSTON AND FRANCIS (1999). A pattern is defined as follows:

The patterns of a word can be defined as all the words and structures which are regularly associated with the word and which contribute to its meaning. A pattern can be identified if a combination of words occurs relatively frequently, if it is dependent on a particular word choice, and if there is a clear meaning associated with it (Hunston and Francis 1999: 37).

2. HOW TO IDENTIFY PATTERNS

You can identify patterns in the following four steps:

1) Generate a KWIC concordance of a particular word.

2) Sort the concordance.

Depending on the word, a right-sorted or a left-sorted concordance may be more promising. For example, for verbs and nouns, a right-sorted concordance is typically more revealing, for prepositions a left-sorted concordance is usually more insightful. However, it is useful to try both right- and left-sorting.

3) Identify recurring combinations of words and/or word classes.

In the simplest case, you can identify a recurring combination of specific words, but more often, some abstraction will be necessary: a recurring combination will become visible if you look at word classes rather than specific words.

However, you must be careful not to overgeneralize; when you group different combinations together on the basis of the fact that they contain the same word class in a particular position, you must make sure they all represent the same meaning.

4) Check which of these combinations of words is restricted to the particular word you are investigating (or a particular group of words to which that word belongs).

Only combinations whose occurrence is restricted to a particular group of words are patterns.

3. TWO PERSPECTIVES ON PATTERNS

By following the procedure in §2, you can identify all the different patterns that occur with a particular word (Hunston and Francis refer to this perspective as *a word and its patterns*, 1999: 37ff.). Once you have identified these patterns, you can turn your perspective around; you can choose a pattern, and investigate which words occur with it—especially if you have access to a corpus with POS-tagging (Hunston and Francis refer to this perspective as *a pattern and its words*, cf. 1999: 43ff.).

REFERENCES

- Hunston, Susan, and Gill Francis. 1999. *Pattern grammar. A corpus-driven approach to the lexical grammar of English*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
Sinclair, John. 1991. *Corpus, concordance, collocation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.