

A Corpus-based Study on the Distribution Patterns of Prepositional Verbs Produced by Chinese EFL Learners

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Abstract

As one of the most important categories of multi-word verbs in English, prepositional verbs are highly produced by native speakers, which may lead to the idiomatic and fluent speeches or writings. This study is based on two corpora (native and learner corpora) and reveals that Chinese EFL learners tend to employ prepositional verbs in distinctive patterns compared to native speakers.

Keywords

prepositional verb, Chinese EFL learner, corpus, distribution pattern.

1. Introduction

According to previous studies (Goldberg, 2004; Kennedy, 2000; Meyer, 1975), native speakers tend to employ prepositional verbs (hereinafter PRV) in high frequency, which contribute much to the fluency and accuracy of speech and writing. Therefore, EFL learners' distribution patterns of PRVs compared to native speakers will help reveal relevant features of second language acquisition process.

2. Data collection and analysis

In this study, all the data will be collected automatically by self-compiled computer programs and manually checked and corrected at last from the native corpus BNC (British National Corpus) and the learner corpus CLEC (Chinese Learners English Corpus). It is revealed that PRVs account for over 70 percent of all the commonly used multi-word verbs (hereinafter MWV) in both BNC and CLEC. Most of top ten MWVs come from PRVs. Thus, PRVs are of great importance in MWVs and deserve a deeper investigation.

2.1 Overall Frequency of Prepositional Verbs

The total number of PRVs concerned in this paper is 75 and the data on their frequencies and proportions are presented in the following table.

Table 1 Frequencies and proportions of PRVs in BNC and CLEC

Rank	PRVs (BNC)	Freq.	%	PRVs (CLEC)	Freq.	%
1	deal with	243	6.30	lead to	201	5.78
2	refer to	220	5.70	know about	200	5.75
3	lead to	187	4.85	listen to	191	5.49
4	look at	146	3.78	deal with	187	5.38
5	give NP to	145	3.76	look at	164	4.72

6	be based on	138	3.58	look for	163	4.69
7	be involved in	130	3.37	worry about	142	4.09
8	talk about	118	3.06	depend on	137	3.94
9	account for	107	2.77	be based on	127	3.65
10	result in	105	2.72	think of	126	3.62
11	depend on	83	2.15	wait for	125	3.60
12	think of	81	2.10	be regarded as	121	3.48
13	look for	81	2.10	send NP to	107	3.08
14	ask for	79	2.05	talk about	106	3.05
15	come from	75	1.94	think about	81	2.33
16	add to	74	1.92	be made of	77	2.22
17	be known as	73	1.89	ask for	75	2.16
18	listen to	72	1.87	result in	61	1.75
19	talk to	70	1.81	give NP to	56	1.61
20	be applied to	69	1.79	belong to	54	1.55
21	be regarded as	64	1.66	consist of	54	1.55
22	turn to	62	1.61	talk to	54	1.55
23	pay for	62	1.61	pay for	53	1.52
24	call for	58	1.50	write to	47	1.35
25	wait for	57	1.48	turn to	45	1.29
26	occur in	54	1.40	come from	44	1.27
27	be accused of	54	1.40	contribute to	43	1.24
28	be related to	52	1.35	look like	41	1.18
29	think about	52	1.35	be divided into	37	1.06
30	know about	51	1.32	call for	36	1.04
31	be seen as	50	1.30	be considered as	34	.978
32	write to	50	1.30	happen to	31	.892
33	contribute to	43	1.11	add to	31	.892
34	be used in	43	1.11	say to NP/say NP to	30	.863
35	consist of	42	1.09	stare at	28	.806
36	happen to	42	1.09	get into	25	.719
37	speak to	42	1.09	refer to	25	.719
38	look like	40	1.04	be related to	24	.690

39	be associated with	39	1.01	believe in	23	.662
40	belong to	39	1.01	play with	22	.633
41	believe in	38	.985	serve as	21	.604
42	worry about	37	.959	be involved in	21	.604
43	send NP to	34	.881	be applied to	20	.575
44	use NP as	33	.855	speak to	19	.547
45	be charged with	32	.829	hear of	14	.403
46	go through	30	.777	be known as	13	.374
47	be made of	29	.751	use NP as	12	.345
48	hear of	28	.726	be used in	12	.345
49	be aimed at	23	.596	be composed of	11	.316
50	be derived from	22	.570	account for	11	.316
51	serve as	20	.518	fill NP with	10	.288
52	get into	20	.518	be aimed at	10	.288
53	be included in	19	.492	do NP for	9	.259
54	say to NP/say NP to	17	.441	obtain NP from	9	.259
55	be jailed for	17	.441	go through	9	.259
56	speak of	16	.415	occur to	8	.230
57	allow for	15	.389	smile at	5	.144
58	be expressed in	13	.337	be defined as	5	.144
59	stare at	13	.337	be accused of	5	.144
60	be defined as	11	.285	speak of	4	.115
61	differ from	10	.259	occur in	4	.115
62	obtain NP from	10	.259	glance at	3	.086
63	be divided into	10	.259	differ from	3	.086
64	be composed of	9	.233	be included in	3	.086
65	be required for	9	.233	be associated with	3	.086
66	be considered as	8	.207	go for	2	.058
67	fill NP with	8	.207	be seen as	2	.058
68	glance at	7	.181	be seen in	0	.000
69	play with	7	.181	play for	0	.000
70	go for	7	.181	be required for	0	.000
71	occur to	6	.155	be expressed in	0	.000

72	smile at	5	.130	allow for	0	.000
73	play for	3	.078	be jailed for	0	.000
74	do NP for	1	.026	be derived from	0	.000
75	be seen in	0	.000	be charged with	0	.000
Total		3859	100	3476	100	

Note: % stands for the frequency ratio of specific PRV to the overall PRVs

Some distinctive distribution patterns of PRVs produced by Chinese learners are shown by the table above. First, the number of PRV with high frequency over 100 across BNC is only 10, while 14 frequent PRVs of this kind have occurred across CLEC. In addition, among those PRVs, only four are shared by native speakers, that is, lead to, look at, be based on, and talk about.

Second, although only be seen in does not appear in BNC, eight PRVs can not be found in CLEC, namely, be seen in, play for, be required for, be expressed in, allow for, be jailed for, be derived from, and be charged with. Most of them are frequently used by native speakers, such as be charged with (32 occurrences per million), be derived from (22 occurrences per million), and be jailed for (17 occurrences per million).

Third, other specific PRVs over-/underused by Chinese EFL learners are also revealed. For instance, be made of (77 to 29), be considered as (34 to 8), stare at (28 to 13), play with (22 to 7) etc. are apparently overused compared to native speakers. Conversely, be known as (13 to 73), be accused of (5 to 54), be associated with (3 to 39), be seen as (2 to 50) etc. are obviously underused by Chinese learners.

2.2 Pattern I Prepositional Verbs and Pattern II Prepositional Verbs

PRVs include two major subcategories in terms of structural pattern.

a) The PRV of pattern 1 is referred to the one that consists of a lexical verb followed by a preposition with which it is semantically and/or syntactically associated. The preposition, as is to be expected, precedes its complement. For example:

(1) Look at the blackboard.

b) The PRV of pattern 2 is followed by two noun phrases, normally separated by the preposition: the former is the direct object, the latter the prepositional object:

(2) May I remind you of our agreement?

Specifically, relevant concordance lines from CLEC are listed below:

Pattern 1: NP + verb + preposition + NP

- [1] chance, and also I would LOOK for a better chance, if
- [2] But he still continued to LOOK for a better hiding-place. He
- [3] island. Then he decided to LOOK for a cave where he
- [4] I will go outside to LOOK for a challenging job. I
- [5] to death and try to LOOK for a change. My view

Pattern 2: NP + verb + NP + preposition + NP

- [1] them indoors as decoration Flowers ADD beauty to the environment urily
- [2] we have various activities to ADD colors to our life. All
- [3] my work in London will ADD great benefit to me and
- [4] celebrate the festival. And they ADD more color to the traditional
- [5] dough and "Jiao Zi Pi" (dumpling skins). ADD some water to flour, blend

Pattern 2 is also common with passive verbs, where the noun phrase corresponding to the direct object has been placed in subject position, for example:

- [1] All kinds of music is REGARDED as a background according to
- [2] nearly died...But she wouldn't be REGARDED as a beggar. Then she
- [3] a pony which would be REGARDED as a Christmas present for
- [4] all, death should not be REGARDED as a failure, but as
- [5] life for nothing, he is REGARDED as a hero. Friendship can't

The total frequency of PRVs in each pattern was calculated respectively in two corpora, and the results are listed below.

Table 2. Overall Frequencies of Pattern 1 and Pattern 2 PRVs

PRVs	BNC	CLEC
Pattern 1	2651	2601
Pattern 2	1208	875
Total	3859	3476

As shown in Table 2, both the total frequency of Pattern 1 and that of Pattern 2 in BNC are higher than their counterparts in CLEC, and it is especially apparent for Pattern 2. The pie graphs below can provide a clear picture reflecting the proportion relations between Pattern 1 and Pattern 2 in each corpus.

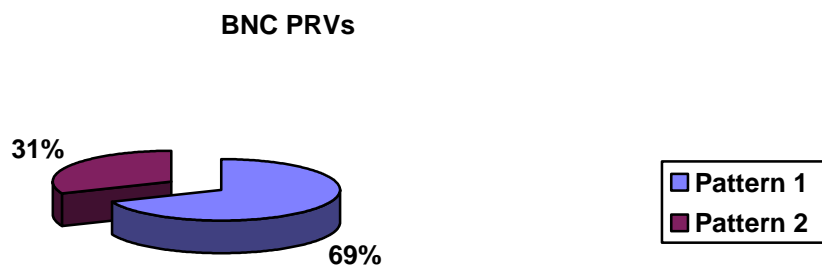


Figure 1. Proportions of Pattern 1 and Pattern 2 across BNC

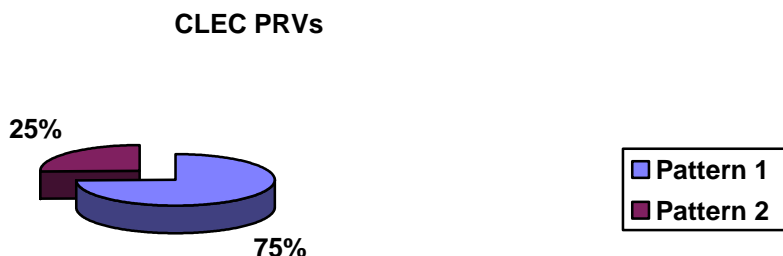


Figure 2. Proportions of Pattern 1 and Pattern 2 across CLEC

It is obvious that Chinese learners have a stronger preference for PRVs of Pattern 1, rather than those of Pattern 2. That can be well reflected in the use of refer to by Chinese learners in comparison to

native speakers. Except for refer to in Pattern 1, 27 occurrences in Pattern 2 can be found across BNC, whereas no use of refer to in Pattern 2 appears across CLEC (See the concordance lines below).

The KWIC for refer to across CLEC (no occurrence of Pattern 2)

- [1] whom I narrow down to REFER to criminals. The government usually
 [2] nature. in a general sense. REFER to our surroundings).(t14-1) This is
 [3] of"all the evil things", we REFER to prostitution, smuggling, burglary,
 [4] the world better, we can REFER to some public media, such
 [5] in English, I need to REFER to the dictionary form time
 [6] Guang zhou"Her colleagues" of course REFER to the teachers in her
 [7] My View on Fake commodities REFER to those commoditie which have
 [8] Here Those who liked him: REFERRED to Peggoty(David and his mother's
 [9] students never feel embarrassed although REFERRING to a weak or irrelevant
 [10] They made many economics policys REFERRING to how to improve the
 [11] away. No doubt, she was REFERRING to it." It's a pity
 [12] integrity. To a government, equality REFERS to a government of people
 [13] China Euthanasia, or mercy killing, REFERS to a practice that helps
 [14] also called mercy killing. It REFERS to hastening the death of
 [15] China Euthanasia, or mercy killing REFERS to hastening the death of
 [16] aim. To a nation, equality REFERS to independence without being controled
 [17] a negative way. Actually, it REFERS to some money-crazy people who
 [18] To my opinion,"Practice Makes Perfect" REFERS to that if you take
 [19] global attention. Euthanasia, generally speaking, REFERS to the bringing about of
 [20] know why? I think it REFERS to the plan and action's
 [21] in front of us.(t13-3) Nature REFERS to the world itself and
 [22] tower Here, the ivory tower REFERS to these universities which separate
 [23] criterion of scoring. Beauty usually REFERS to what appeals to the
 [24] on as beautiful. Beauty also REFERS to what appeals to the
 [25] are colloquial language; Slang, however, REFERS to words and expressions understood

The KWIC for refer to in Pattern 2 across BNC

- [1] his head in disagreement. I REFER him to a pamphlet that
 [2] either discharge the case, or REFER it to the Sheriff for
 [3] understand that Buckinghamshire expects to REFER the application to the Secretary
 [4] of Electricity Supply might yet REFER the electricity industry to the
 [5] You said that you would REFER the matter to the Commissioner
 [6] case studies to which I REFERRED highlight a serious problem. I
 [7] on which the Reporter had REFERRED their case to the Children's
 [8] minority of our survey subjects REFERRED themselves to the GP, drugs
 [9] that his case has been REFERRED to a children's hearing, he
 [10] minute amounts have to be REFERRED to a committee, including items
 [11] No. 2) Order 1991 be REFERRED to a Standing Committee on
 [12] Consequential Amendments) Order 1991 be REFERRED to a Standing Committee on
 [13] Pollution)(Amendment) Order 1991 be REFERRED to a Standing Committee on
 [14] S.I., 1991, No. 1522) be REFERRED to a Standing Committee on
 [15] S.I., 1991, No. 1609) be REFERRED to a Standing Committee on
 [16] S.I., 1991, No. 1682) be REFERRED to a Standing Committee on

- [17] S.I., 1991, No. 2076) be REFERRED to a Standing Committee on
- [18] S.I., 1991, No. 1497) be REFERRED to a Standing Committee on
- [19] S.I., 1991, No. 1520) be REFERRED to a Standing Committee on
- [20] The matter will now be REFERRED to dioceses for consultation. The
- [21] Information on individual cases is REFERRED to him in so far
- [22] environmental impact assessments must be REFERRED to the appropriate regulatory agency,
- [23] does not have to be REFERRED to the appropriate regulatory agency.
- [24] 308 patients who had been REFERRED to the local Detoxification Unit
- [25] I believe will be automatically REFERRED to the Privileges Committee but
- [26] chapter, and the reader is REFERRED to the reviews of Nickel
- [27] the planning application should be REFERRED to the Secretary of State.

3. Conclusion

PRVs account for greater proportion in either BNC or CLEC because they draw on the full set of prepositions, including important forms denoting non-spatial relations, such as *as*, *with*, *for*, and *of* (Biber, 2000). In addition, it seems that Chinese students use fewer PRVs in Pattern 2 on account of the smaller proportion, compared to that of native speakers. One possible explanation for it is that PRVs in Pattern 2 need both direct object and prepositional object, which virtually increases the complexity and difficulty for Chinese students.

Acknowledgements

This paper is subsidized by “The 3rd Excellent Engineer Project of Teaching Reform Research” in University of Science and Technology Liaoning (Project Title: A Study on the Cultivation Pattern of Practical Engineering Talents in College English Teaching based on the Excellent Engineer Project).

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