

# Semantic Opacity in the Production of *Delexicalized verb + Noun* Collocations by Tamil Learners: A Study

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## ABSTRACT

Semantic opacity is closely related to delexicalized verbs because delexicalized verbs do not have standalone meanings. This characteristic of delexicalized verbs can be a challenge to L2 learners in achieving 'native-like' fluency. This paper is an attempt to study the influence of semantic opacity in the production of *delexicalized verb + noun* collocations by advanced learners of English.

## 1. Introduction

Semantic opacity is defined in terms of whether the meaning of a word combination can be understood from the meaning of the individual items. According to Hausmann (1989), this is a good criterion to the differentiae idioms from non-idiomatic expressions. For the idioms, the semantics of the full combination is opaque, that is, their meanings are made up of each individual item in their entirety (e.g. *once in a blue moon*, *a piece of cake*). However, the meanings of non-idiomatic word combinations like collocations are easily detectable from their parts. Since collocations are conventional combination of words that habitually occur together in a sentence, the meanings of words are usually transparent like in *commit a crime*. Nevertheless, according to phraseologists, for a word combination to be considered a collocation, at least one of the items should have a specialized meaning, that is, it should either have a figurative sense or a technical sense (Moon, 1998). Therefore, collocations can be distinguished from idioms by employing the criterion of semantic opacity which would reveal the degree of transparency in a collocation. This study seeks to analyze and understand the degree to which semantic opacity influences the production of *delexicalized verb + noun* collocations in the translation tasks attempted by advanced learners of English.

## 2. Semantic Opacity and Delexicalized Verbs

Delexicalized verbs are closely related to semantic opacity, because they are a type of words which have little or no meaning outside the context of their particular use. They are verbs such as "have" in *have a feeling* or "make" in *make a presentation* whose original meaning disappears when they combine with certain nouns. Buckingham (2008, pg. 164) notes that in a delexical structure, semantic meaning is shifted towards the noun; the meaning of the noun becomes the prime one, while the meaning of the delexical verb is neglected, and he calls that as "emphasis on the semantic contribution of the noun".

Taeko (2005, pg. 226) states that "delexical verbs, are closely related to semantic opacity. If verbs in verb-noun

collocations have little or no meaning outside the context of their particular use, they will be difficult to understand and produce in collocations". Hence, in a delexical structure, the semantic weakness of delexical verbs makes it difficult for learners to select the right verb. Hugon (2006, pg. 15) agrees to this notion and contends that the semantic weakness of delexical verbs has its effect on the choice of the verb. To support his view, he takes the example of the delexicalized verb, "make". Learners made the following collocations: *make a research*, *make a poll*, and *make a balance*. The correct collocations are: *do a research*, *carry out a poll*, and *strike a balance*. He observes that the selection of the verb, "make" is mistaken because of the semantic weakness of the position of that verb, i.e., semantically there is no big difference in meaning between "make" and the verbs, "do", "carry out", and "strike".

Philip (2003, pg.10) echoes Hugon's notion when he asserts that delexical forms abound in the English, and when used wrongly, the flow of meaning is interrupted, resulting in incomprehension, misunderstanding and, sometimes, embarrassment or unintended humour. This is particularly true in an L2 context. Investigation into the use of *delexicalized verb + noun* combinations by Chinese learners were carried out by Chi, et al. (1994) who examined the verbs "have", "make", "take", "do" and "get" from a one-million-word corpus based on essays. They found that using these combinations are difficult even for advanced level learners.

This article is based on a small research study on the effect of semantic opacity during the translation tasks carried out by 25 post-graduate students of English from St. Joseph's College, Tiruchirappalli, India. There were 20 sentences using the delexicalized verb + noun combinations. The 20 sentences were further divided into two groups 10 sentences each based on the two collocational criteria: combinability and transparency. The following are the collocational combinations used in the tasks:

**Table 1: List of Collocations Used in the Study**

a. Delexicalized Verb + Noun: [+Rescomb, +Transp]	b. Delexicalized Verb + Noun: [-Rescomb, -Transp]
1. keep a record	11. keep/stay/be cool
2. do one's best	12. make a presentation
3. have the potential (to)	13. make an eye contact
4. take a risk	14. take/make notes
5. keep pace	15. grab the attention of someone
6. give examples	16. see the irony
7. do a good job	17. obtain/receive a replacement
8. have a feeling	18. keep/have one's eye on something
9. give someone a name	19. get home
10. do the billing	20. take/have a look

\* Rescomb = Restricted Combinability, Transp = Transparency

The tasks were designed in such a manner that the participants had to fill in only the appropriate delexicalized verb in the parenthesis (See Appendix).

**3. Influence of Semantic Opacity: An Analysis**

Chi, et al (2004), in their research, had found that delexicalised verbs are difficult for L2 learners. The participants of this study too had difficulty producing delexicalized verb + noun collocations because of the opaque or half transparent meanings of the collocational constituents. An analysis of the answers reveals the following factors:

1. There were no significant differences between the scores in both [+Rescomb, +Transp] and [-Rescomb, -Transp] categories of delexicalized verbs + noun collocations. Acceptable answers were only slightly better in the [-Rescomb, -Transp] category in which

more than one delexicalized verb could have been used.

2. The error percentages of 40.4 for the [+Rescomb, +Transp] category and 35.6 for [-Rescomb, -Transp] category are quite high for the post-graduate students of English, who are advanced learners.
3. 9.2 % of the answers in the [+Rescomb, +Transp] category and 4.4% of the answers in the [-Rescomb, -Transp] category were blanks. Learners resort to leaving blanks when they are not able to produce target collocations or any other acceptable answer. They do not rely on L1, but give up expressing themselves. Avoidance occurs then learners find it difficult to produce L2 structures which are different from those in L1.

**Table 2: Delexicalized Verb+Noun [+Rescomb, +Transp]**

Acceptable		Inappropriate				Blank		Total	
Raw Score	%	Error		L1 Transfer		Raw Score	%	Raw Score	%
		Raw Score	%	Raw Score	%				
113	45.2	101	40.4	13	5.2	23	9.2	250	100

**Table 3: Delexicalized Verb+Noun][-Rescomb, -Transp]**

Acceptable		Inappropriate				Alternate Combinations		Blank		Total	
Raw Score	%	Error		L1 Transfer		Raw Score	%	Raw Score	%	Raw Score	%
		Raw Score	%	Raw Score	%						
121	48.4	89	35.6	12	4.8	17	6.8	11	4.4	250	100

4. Majority of the inappropriate answers in both categories were due to the fact that the delexicalized verbs had opaque or half transparent meanings. A detailed list of inappropriate answers for each of the target collocations for [+Rescomb, +Transp] and [-Rescomb, -Transp] categories are given in tables 4 and 5. As stated earlier in this article, the primary reason for these errors could have been the semantic weakness/opacity of the delexicalized verbs and this could have led to incomprehension and

misunderstanding. A close look at the answers for each collocation reveals that the students resorted to both delexicalized and lexical verbs that sounded similar in meaning to the target delexicalized verb. For instance, in the [+Rescomb, +Transp] category where alternate combinations are not possible, the delexicalized verb *keep* was replaced by other delexicalized and lexical verbs with similar meaning (*take, make, save, fill, do*). Interestingly, for the collocation *do the billing*, majority of the answers

replacing the delexicalized verbs were lexical verbs (*calculate, transfer, count, tally, check*). This proves yet another fact that even advanced learners are not able to recognize the difference between delexicalized verbs and lexical verbs. L1 transparency in meaning

also seem to have influenced the selection of lexical verbs like in *do the billing*, “கணக்கிடுவார்கள்” in Tamil means to “calculate, count, tally”.

**Table 4: Delexicalized Verb+Noun [+Rescomb, +Transp]**

Target Collocations	Inappropriate Answers due to Semantic Opacity
1. keep a record	take, make, save, fill, do
2. do their best	perform, exhibit, to be
3. have the potential (to)	are, grow, get, can
4. take a risk	perform, face, brave
5. keep pace	maintain, have, develop
6. give examples	tell, have, say
7. do a good job	finish, perform, produce, deliver, complete
8. do the billing	calculate, transfer, count, tally, check
9. have a feeling	say, like, think
10. give a name	choose, suit, name, keep

5. In the [-Rescomb, -Transp] category where alternate combinations are possible, majority of the inappropriate alternatives were lexical verbs. The learners seem to have been familiar with the collocation: *take notes*. 24 out of the 25 students gave the appropriate answer and 1 left it blank. However, for the collocation *see the irony*, they came up with many possible answers which included lexical, delexicalized verbs and even phrases. This again implies that even in [-Rescomb, -Transp] category collocations with

possibilities for combinations with other delexicalized verbs of similar meaning, learners faced difficulties. In this category too, there were instances of L1 transparency. For example, the collocation *see the irony* had the following wrong lexical alternatives: *concentrate, careful, and attention*, and they are different possible meanings for the Tamil word “கவனம்”.

**Table 5: Delexicalized Verb+Noun [-Rescomb, -Transp]**

Target Collocations	Inappropriate Answers due to Semantic Opacity
1. keep cool	stand, are, remain, manage, face, act
2. make a presentation	deliver, lecture, select, present, talk
3. make eye contact	establish, see, have, keep, look
4. take notes	---
5. grab the attention	earn, observe, cover, attract, get
6. see the irony	care, concentrate, notice, listen, look, bother, identify, find, consider, mind, care about, bother about, take note of, know, understand
7. receive the president	invite
8. keep an eye	involving, concentrate, careful, listen, show, attention
9. get home	return, come, come back, be coming
10. have a look	make, think, see, talk, discuss

**4. Conclusion**

This research establishes and proves the close relationship between semantic opacity and delexicalized verbs and how this can be major problem area for L2 learners in achieving ‘native-like’ fluency. Due to their high frequency of use, delexical verbs might have departed from their lexical meaning to convey a certain purpose other than to perform a certain action. Therefore, they are largely dependent on the nouns for their

meaning and it is at this point opacity plays a major role. This study has proved that delexical verbs are problematic for even advanced learners. Therefore, while teaching delexicalized verbs and their collocations, teachers should make students understand the semantic weakness of delexicalized verbs and eliminate the problems by giving some clarifications on the structure and the prime role of nouns in such delexical structures.

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### **Appendix** **Translation Tasks**

Look at the sentences in Tamil and English. Each sentence in English translation needs to be completed by you based on the translation. Write an English word to fill each blank.

**Duration: 20 Minutes**

1. After the high-level talks, the secretaries were advised to ( ) a record of items agreed upon.  
மேல்மட்ட பேச்சுவார்த்தைகளுக்கு பின்னர் ஒப்பு கொள்ளப்பட்ட விஷயங்களை பதிவு செய்துவைக்குமாறு உதவியாளர்கள் அறிவுறுத்தப்பட்டனர்.
2. The students were advised to ( ) their best in the upcoming examinations.  
வரவிருக்கும் தேர்வுகளில் தாங்கள் சிறப்பாக செயல்பட வேண்டுமென்று மாணவர்கள் அறிவுறுத்தப்பட்டனர்.
3. These cells ( ) the potential to develop into any type of tissue.  
இந்த செல்கள் எந்தவித திசுவாகவும் பல் கிபெருகும் திறன் பெற்றவை.
4. To be a winner, you need to ( ) a risk at every opportunity.  
வெற்றியாளனாக உருவாக, கிடைக்கும் ஒவ்வொரு வாய்ப்பிலும் துணிந்து செயல்பட வேண்டும்..
5. You need English to ( ) pace with the rapid advancements in science and technology.  
அறிவியலிலும் தொழில்நுட்பத்திலும் இன்று காணப்படும் அசுர வேக வளர்ச்சிக்கு ஈடுகொடுக்க ஆங்கில புலமை அவசியம்.
6. Everyone should ( ) examples to support one's line of argument  
அவரவர் வாதங்களுக்கு பொருந்தக் கூடிய எடுத்துக்காட்டுகளை அனைவரும் கண்டிப்பாக கூற வேண்டும்.
7. When a job is assigned, employees should ask for adequate time to ( ) a good job.  
வேலை ஒதுக்கீடு செய்யப்படும் போழுது,  
பணியாளர்கள் அதை சிறப்பாக முடிக்க தேவையான கால அவகாசத்தை கேட்டு பெற வேண்டும்.
8. Bankers ( ) the billing everyday once transactions end.  
அன்றாடம் நடக்கும் அனைத்து பணப்பரிவர்த்தனைகளும் முடிந்த பின்னர் ரேவங்கி பணியாளர்கள் அதனை கணக்கிடுவார்கள்.
9. Most people ( ) a feeling that a silent man is a dangerous man.  
அமைதியான மனிதன் ஆபத்தானவன் என்றே பெரும்பாலான மக்கள் எண்ணுகிறார்கள்.
10. In some traditional communities, an elder usually ( ) a name to the newborn.

சிலபாரம்பரியசமூகங்களில்,புதிதாகபிறந்தகுழந்தைக்குமுத்தவரஓருவர்தான்பெயர்தூட்டுவார்.

11. True mark of valor is how you ( ) cool under the most trying of circumstances.  
மிகவும்நெருக்கடியானநிலையிலும்நிதானமாக இருப்பதேஉண்மையானவல்லமைக்குஅடையாளம்.
12. Choose someone from your group to ( ) a presentation in class.  
வகுப்பில்விரிவுரையளிக்கஉங்களுக்குமுனியில்இருக்கும்யாராவதுஓருவரைதேர்வுசெய்யவும்.
13. Try to smile, and ( ) eye contact with the members of the jury.  
நடுவர்குமுனியினர்களை பார்த்து புன்னகைகிக்க முயற்சிசெய்ய.
14. Do not ( ) notes, but rather focus on understanding the key concepts.  
குறிப்புஎதுவும்எடுக்கவேண்டாம்,அதற்குபதில்முக்கியகருத்துக்களைபுரிந்துகொள்வதில்கவனம்செல்லுதவும்.
15. You should do something different to ( ) the attention of your prospective employer.  
உன்னுடையவருங்காலமுதலாளியின்கவனத்தைஈர்க்கநீஏதாவதுவித்தியாசமாகசெய்யவேண்டும்.
16. The crowd does not ( ) the irony in Antony's speech.  
ஆண்டனியின்பேச்சில்இருந்தமுரண்பாட்டைகூட்டத்தினர்கண்டுகொள்ளவில்லை.
17. Thousands of people gathered outside the airport to ( ) the president.  
ஆயிரக்கணக்கானமக்கள்ஜனாதிபதியைவரவேற்கவிமானநிலையத்தில்கூடினர்.
18. While reading loud, you should ( ) an eye on your pronunciation.  
உரக்கவாசிக்கும்பொழுதுஉச்சரிப்பில்கவனம்கொள்ளவேண்டும்.
19. Her father will ( ) home at 10.00 pm.  
அவளுடையதந்தைபத்துமணிக்குவீடுதிரும்புவார்.
20. Let us ( ) a look at the pros and cons of the proposed idea.  
முன்மொழியப்பட்டயோசனையின்சாதகபாதகங்களைபற்றிஇப்போதுநாம்பார்க்கலாம்.