Reviews

Collins COBUILD *Grammar Patterns 2: Nouns and Adjectives*, edited by **Gill Francis**, **Susan Hunston**, and **Elizabeth Manning**, with **John Sinclair** as the founding editor-in-chief of the COBUILD series. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998. 592 pp. ISBN 0–00–375068–X. Reviewed by **Erik Smitterberg**, Uppsala University.

According to the editors, the *Collins* COBUILD *grammar patterns 2: Nouns and adjectives* (henceforth '*Patterns 2*'), the companion volume to the *Collins* COBUILD *grammar patterns 1: Verbs*, 'presents all the patterns of English nouns and adjectives, and relates these patterns to meaning' (p vii). A noun or adjective pattern consists of the noun or adjective, together with the typical or significant words that come after, or in some cases before it (p vii). Roughly 10,000 nouns and adjectives have been studied for patterns (p ix), and over 200 patterns are presented in the volume (p vii). As its target audience, *Patterns 2* has intermediate learners and above, though the volume is also intended for teachers of English.

    Patterns 2 is organized in the following way. The Introduction includes information on what constitutes a pattern, and an explanation with exemplification of how a pattern is presented in the volume. It also includes advice on how to use *Patterns 2*, a special section with advice for teachers, and a glossary of grammatical terms with definitions of the terms used in the volume. The bulk of the book consists of descriptions of the patterns themselves. The patterns are divided into two main sections: those with a noun as headword and those with an adjective. There are also subdivisions within these groups, so that for instance all patterns consisting of nouns followed by prepositions are treated in the same section. Below this level, the patterns themselves constitute the sections. After all the patterns have been gone through, there is an Appendix to explain different forms of patterns caused by a change in word order, for instance. At the end of *Patterns 2* come a Pattern Finder including all the patterns taken up and a Word Index including all the nouns and adjectives listed; both include page references.

    Patterns 2 is based on a pragmatic view of language: according to the editors, '[o]ne of the most important features of the Grammar Patterns series is its identification of the link between pattern and meaning' (p viii). As an example

of how this works, Pattern 92 (pp 428ff) will be used in what follows. The different patterns are named after their constituents. Pattern 92 is 'ADJ *at* n', thus dealing with adjectives which are followed by the preposition *at* and a noun group (or, alternatively, an -*ing* clause, resulting in the alternative pattern 'ADJ *at* -ing').[1] The headwords of each pattern 'have been divided into groups according to their basic meaning' (p viii); these meaning groups function as subsections within patterns. Each meaning group is named after one or several of the nouns or adjectives it includes. For Pattern 92, the meaning groups are the 'good' group, the 'nervous' group, and the 'angry' group. The adjectives in the 'good' group, for instance, 'indicate that someone does something well or badly' (p 428). Some of the nouns or adjectives in each group are exemplified as occurring in the pattern based on data from the Bank of English corpus. At the end of a meaning group comes a list of the nouns or adjectives which occur in the pattern being dealt with, and which fit the basic meaning of the meaning group: the 'good' group includes, among others, the adjectives *inept* and *okay* (p 429).[2] If some headwords that occur in a pattern cannot be fitted into any of the meaning groups, they are given in a special subsection at the end of the section dealing with the pattern in question.

It goes almost without saying that a volume such as *Patterns 2* is of great value to learners and teachers of English alike. Apart from being a useful reference book for learners who are unsure of how to use either a given pattern or a given noun or adjective, *Patterns 2* can be used both in the classroom and as a basis for assignments between classes. As for more specific advantages, the presentation of individual patterns is handled very well: the patterns are gone through in a consistent manner throughout the volume, the language used is easy to understand, and layout features such as boldface, italics, and small capitals are used to make it easier for readers to find their way through the patterns. When a given construction could be seen as belonging to several patterns, a cross-reference has been inserted. For instance, if one looks at the first sentence of this paragraph and tries to find *value* occurring in Pattern 39, 'N *to* n', one will find a reference to Pattern 68, '*of* N', for those patterns which have the structure '*of* N *to* n'.[3] Furthermore, from both a pedagogical and a mnemonic viewpoint, it is probably a good idea to name the meaning groups after one or several of their constituents: the learner will probably find 'the "good" group' easier to remember than, for instance, 'adjectives indicating that someone does something well or badly' – and, in addition, he/she might also be less discouraged by the former label.

However, when one goes through the volume in more detail, a number of drawbacks also become apparent; in fact, it is easy to see how the information

presented in *Patterns 2* could be remodelled and extended in ways which would make it even more helpful. Since *Patterns 2* is intended for learners rather than linguists, I will adopt a learner's perspective in what follows, focusing on features of *Patterns 2* which might be problematic for learners. However, I will also comment on issues related to the framework of corpus linguistics when they have a bearing on the learner's situation.

There are two basic ways of using *Patterns 2*: either one looks up a particular noun or adjective in the Word Index to see in what patterns it occurs, or one looks up a particular pattern to see what nouns or adjectives occur in it (p x); in other words, one goes from form to pattern or from pattern to form. In either case, one will also find information about what other nouns or adjectives occur in the same pattern and meaning group.

However, it is doubtful whether the latter way of using the book, ie going from pattern to form, will be a true option for the intermediate group among the 'students of intermediate level and above' at whom, according to its dust jacket, *Patterns 2* is aimed. Unfortunately the category of 'intermediate learners' is not defined; however, beginning Swedish university students of English, who will have studied English for roughly ten years in primary, secondary, and upper secondary school, would surely be considered at least 'intermediate' if not 'early advanced'. However, speaking as a teacher of English grammar at basic university level, I believe that the more elaborate patterns would cause major problems for such students: most of them are on too low a level in terms of proficiency as well as knowledge of linguistic terminology and structure to be able to identify, for instance, the adjective *ludicrous* in the sentence *It would be ludicrous for him to travel economy or stay in a third-rate hotel* as an instance of the pattern 'it v-link ADJ *for* n to-inf' (pp 498ff). A glossary of grammatical terms is provided, but it is doubtful whether some of the concepts explained there are (or, indeed, can be) presented so that intermediate learners can make sense of them in such short format. For example, I am not convinced that an explanation for 'finite clause' such as 'In a finite clause, the verb group includes an indication of tense or modality, eg *It's obvious **you believe in happy endings**' (p xiv) will prove helpful to intermediate learners. Admittedly, it is likely that intermediate learners are able to go from form to pattern, and can thus make use of *Patterns 2* anyway. Nevertheless, it would have increased the pedagogical value of *Patterns 2* if it had contained clear definitions of its target groups; the patterns could also have been graded for difficulty. Another issue not explicitly touched upon is the different problems encountered in first- and second-language teaching and learning. In other words, it is somewhat unclear for whom *Patterns 2* is intended, in terms both of linguistic proficiency and background.

Moreover, identifying a piece of natural language as a noun or adjective pattern becomes even more difficult when the elements of a pattern do not appear in the order stated. For instance, in relative clauses all noun patterns with a preposition between the noun and a noun group in their basic order will have their constituents rearranged: thus, *fight* in *He has a list of things over which he would relish a fight* is an example of the pattern 'N *over* n' (p 547), despite the fact that the actual order in the sentence is '*over* n N', with a pronoun, a verb phrase, and a determiner between the two latter constituents, and with the noun group replaced by a relative pronoun.[4] Changes in constituent order such as this are discussed in the Appendix to *Patterns 2*, but although there is nothing wrong with the discussion as such, intermediate learners will doubtlessly find it very difficult to identify patterns when their constituents have been rearranged in this fashion; indeed, such a task may cause problems even for advanced learners. However, it is probable that reasons of space would make it impossible to go through all possible variations in constituent order for each individual pattern; rather, the questions are again for whom *Patterns 2* is intended, and how to define the concept of 'intermediate learner'.

The editors focus on three particular areas where *Patterns 2* may be used as a resource by teachers (and learners). First, *Patterns 2* is claimed to be a useful tool for raising language awareness (p xi f). This is doubtlessly the case, and *Patterns 2* would clearly be very useful in for instance composition courses for non-native learners. *Patterns 2* is ideally suited for tutor–learner interaction, where the tutor can point to alternative or better ways of using a given noun or adjective with reference to the learner's writing, and help the learner with the more difficult sections of the book. *Patterns 2* might also function as reference material for advanced learners who are looking for suitable patterns for nouns or adjectives they wish to use.

Secondly, it is claimed that *Patterns 2* can be used for vocabulary building (p xii f). Here, it is intended that the lists of nouns and adjectives accompanying each of the meaning groups associated with a given pattern be used to increase learners' vocabulary. The chief benefit of this method is probably that a learner will see new words in their syntactic context, and words and patterns can thus act as mutual prompters. At least advanced learners should be able to use *Patterns 2* in this way.

The third activity singled out by the editors is checking accuracy (p xiii). For those patterns whose lists of nouns and adjectives are supposedly comprehensive, it is possible for learners to check whether their use of an adjective or noun in a certain pattern is correct or not. However, a few problems become apparent here. First, in order to check the correctness of a given noun/adjective–pattern

collocation, the learner must, as stated above, be able to identify the pattern and then recognize it in the shape of the terminology used in *Patterns 2* – quite an advanced task in itself.[5] Secondly, as pointed out by the editors, the presence of a noun or adjective in a meaning group list for a given pattern means that it occurs in the pattern in question 'reasonably frequently in the Bank of English' (p xiii); but its absence means that it occurs in the pattern either infrequently or not at all. Thus, it is only possible to use *Patterns 2* to show that a given noun or adjective is idiomatic in combination with a given (relatively frequent) pattern, not that it is not.

Moreover, the notions of reasonable frequency and idiomaticity may cause further problems for the learner, and even more so for his/her teacher. In the first place, no specification of just how frequent a given noun/adjective–pattern collocation has to be to be considered to occur 'reasonably frequently' is given. The learner, and also his/her teacher, who will often be a researcher, have to take the editors' word for it that the cut-off point has been well chosen.

Secondly, nothing is said about how the Bank of English, the corpus on which the information presented in *Patterns 2* is based, is composed: one has to go to the *Collins COBUILD English dictionary* to get such information.[6] Extralinguistic key concepts such as genre[7] and situation are conspicuous by their absence from a corpus-based work like *Patterns 2*, and this absence causes problems for learners and teachers concerned with idiomaticity.[8] Whether a certain usage 'is in accord with idiomatic English' (p xiii) or not is dependent not only on linguistic context but also on extralinguistic context. With 350 million words – the size of the Bank of English when *Patterns 2* was compiled (p iv) – on which to base investigations, there are several ways in which the information presented in *Patterns 2* could be extended. When the Bank of English contained circa 200 million words, roughly 70 per cent of the corpus consisted of British English, 25 per cent of American English, and five per cent of other native varieties (Collins 1995: xii). Moreover, the Bank of English contains texts from a wide variety of genres[9], and even contains a substantial portion of spoken, informal English. It seems obvious that advanced learners and teachers alike would have benefited greatly from being able to find information on whether a given noun/adjective–pattern collocation is commoner in spoken or written English, in British or American English, and even in this or that genre.[10]

I will give two examples of how including extralinguistic information could have improved *Patterns 2* from the learner's viewpoint. First, let us return to Pattern 92, 'ADJ *at* n' (pp 428ff). As pointed out above, two of the adjectives listed under the 'good' group are *okay* and *inept*. Both are of course correct English in this pattern, but it is likely that they have different stylistic nuances,

and would be common in different genres. I would guess that *okay* is more common in spoken and informal written genres than in formal written genres, and possibly more common in American English than in British English, whereas the opposite is, by and large, true for *inept*. The point is, however, that this is exactly the type of information which could be included in *Patterns 2,* if extra-linguistic information were taken into account. By having access to such information, the learner would be less likely to make awkward stylistic choices – and, if he/she is learning English as a second language, would not risk having to rely on sweeping statements by non-native speakers, such as those I made above about *okay* and *inept*.

If the above example might merely make the learner sound slightly unidiomatic (although both *okay* and *inept* are 'in accord with idiomatic English' [p xiii] in Pattern 92), there are other examples which might cause more serious problems. Pattern 11, for instance, deals with vocative nouns, and one of the meaning groups, the 'love' group, includes nouns that 'are used to address someone in an affectionate or informal way' (pp 32ff). One of the nouns listed is *woman*. However, nothing is said about *woman* used as a vocative being regarded as offensive in English. Instead, a '7' after *woman* directs the learner to sense 7 of the entry for 'woman' in the *Collins COBUILD English dictionary*, where this information is given. Thus, the learner must have access to the *Collins COBUILD English dictionary* in order both to make full use of *Patterns 2* and to be able to trust the information presented in it. (This problem was also touched on above in connection with the makeup of the Bank of English corpus.) It would have been desirable to have information about the interrelations of these two volumes printed clearly on the dust jacket: it is stated that '[t]he two "Grammar Patterns" volumes are companions to the revolutionary Collins COBUILD English Dictionary', but nothing is said about the dictionary being necessary to make full use of *Patterns 2*. Ideally, however, *Patterns 2* should itself contain information about variation among registers, genres, and regions for those patterns, nouns, and adjectives where such variation is linguistically significant.

It could be argued here that *Patterns 2* is hard enough to handle for the learner as it is, and that added information might make the volume too difficult to use. However, it would be possible to use layout to indicate which sections are intended primarily for intermediate learners, which are suited for advanced learners, and so on. Moreover, it would add to the value of *Patterns 2* if learners were able to keep using it and discover new sections as their knowledge of English increased.

To sum up, *Patterns 2* is clearly a valuable addition to reference libraries for advanced learners and above. It contains information which neither grammars

nor dictionaries usually focus on, and presents it in a reader-friendly way as far as the individual patterns are concerned. However, it is to be hoped that *Patterns 2* can be extended to include information on the Bank of English, and – perhaps even more importantly for the learner – on how the noun/adjective–pattern collocations presented are used with reference to variation with genre, register, and region. Moreover, the exact target group of *Patterns 2* should be redefined.

Notes

1. Patterns are coded in the following manner: an upper-case 'ADJ' or 'N' is used for the adjective or noun which is the headword of the pattern, ie the slot which can be filled by the nouns or adjectives listed as occurring in the pattern. Those constituents of a pattern other than the headword which can be filled by different lexical units (or combinations of lexical units) are presented in lower case, such as 'n' for a noun group and 'that' for a *that*-clause. Finally, lower-case italics are used for fixed constituents, such as *at* and *there*.

2. In most cases, these lists are comprehensive – in the sense that they include all the adjectives or nouns that occur in the pattern in question 'reasonably frequently' (p xiii). However, for some patterns only the commonest nouns and adjectives are listed, and a few groups do not include lists. Moreover, when a pattern is 'productive with a particular meaning' in the sense that many nouns or adjectives can be used in it, only the commonest are listed (p ix).

3. It is of course also possible either to use the Pattern Finder to see where the pattern '*of* N *to* n' is dealt with, or to look up *value* in the Word Index to see on which pages it occurs.

4. With a stranded preposition, the sentence would of course be *He has a list of things which he would relish a fight over*, and the order 'n N *over*'.

5. The only alternative to this procedure would be to look up the noun or adjective in the Word Index, and then go through all the patterns in which it occurs until the correct pattern is found. Needless to say, this would be a time-consuming activity, at least for those adjectives and nouns that occur in a great many patterns.

6. It is possible that such information is also included in the *Collins Cobuild grammar patterns 1: Verbs*. However, that volume was not available to me.

7. In this review, the term 'genre' is used in the sense 'text category defined on extralinguistic grounds'.

8. Needless to say, adding extralinguistic information on a large scale would be a very demanding task, and the absence of such information does not make the wealth of knowledge included in *Patterns 2* less valuable as such. However, given that the possibilities exist, the concept of providing the learner with linguistic and extralinguistic information on usage in the same volume is clearly very attractive.

9. Among the genres mentioned explicitly are 'newspapers, magazines, fiction and non-fiction books, brochures, leaflets, reports, and letters' (Collins 1995: xii). Media language receives a special emphasis, including, apart from newspapers and magazines, radio and TV.

10. Incidentally, something similar to this has been done in Biber et al (1999). Their grammar is based on a corpus consisting of four genres which are '(a) important, highly productive varieties of the language, and (b) different enough from one another to represent a wide range of variation' – conversation, fiction, news, and academic prose (Biber et al 1999: 15f). There are many tables and figures in the volume that show how frequent linguistic features, such as the progressive and the perfect, are in the different genres.

11. It is not stated in my copy of the dictionary exactly what edition it is.

References

Biber, Douglas, Stig Johansson, Geoffrey Leech, Susan Conrad and Edward Finegan. 1999. *Longman grammar of spoken and written English*. Harlow: Pearson.

Collins COBUILD English dictionary. 1995. New edition, completely revised.[11] London: HarperCollins.