AWKA JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERARY STUDIES (AJELLS)

Volume 12 Number 3
September, 2025

Deviance in Collocation and Colligation Constraints in Nigerian Newspaper Editorials: A Lexical Priming Analysis

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Abstract

Newspaper editorials occupy a pivotal position as authoritative texts that inform, persuade, and model linguistic standards. In Nigeria, however, editorial writing has been found to occasionally reflect inconsistencies in word combinations and syntactic structures. This has raised a lot of questions about their linguistic integrity. This study, therefore, x-rays the deviants in collocation and colligation constraints in Nigerian newspaper editorials. The study employs Michael Hoey's Lexical Priming Theory to explain how writers' lexical and structural choices are shaped by prior linguistic exposure and how deviations from established priming manifest in professional discourse.Qualitative research design is adopted. Samples are purposively chosen from Punch and Vanguard newspapers published between January and May 2025. The analysis focused on verb + noun and verb + preposition collocations, alongside syntactic constructions that breached colligational norms. Findings reveal that Nigerian newspaper editorials frequently deviate from collocation and colligation norms. This undermines clarity, impede logical flow, distort persuasive intent, and compromise editorial credibility. These deviations are attributed to mother-tongue interference, limited

exposure to standard linguistic input, overreliance on technical lexis, and unconscious lexical priming. These lapses continue to infest non-standard language practices within academic and professional domains. Hence, this study advocates for enhanced editorial training, deliberate exposure to standard English usage, and heightened linguistic awareness to safeguard communicative precision, strengthen editorial credibility and enrich Nigerian newspapers' contribution to scholarly and national discourse.
Keywords: collocation, colligation, deviance, constraint, priming.

Introduction

Collocation and colligation are integral to linguistic competence which provides support for standard language use. In conventional writing, these features are guided by established syntactic and lexical rules that ensure clarity and fluency. In recent years, the study of collocation and colligation has gained attention as essential components in linguistic competence particularly in writing, language acquisition, language use, and language understanding. By understanding the patterns of word co-occurrence, writers improve their fluency and accuracy. In addition, collocations and colligations provide valuable insights into the semantic and syntactic properties of words and phrases. These elements help in producing standard language which boosts academic and professional writings.

This study investigates the effects of collocation and colligation deviations in Nigerian editorials. Specifically, it examines;

i. the factors contributing to collocation and colligation deviations in Nigerian newspapers;
ii. the implications of these deviations on language use.

Conceptual Framework

Collocation

The word collocation originates from the Latin verb, 'collocare'. (col means 'together' and locare means 'to place'. So, collocare

means to set in order/ to arrange, (Yvonne, qtd. in Biskri 2012)**.** One of the foundational voices in collocation is John Rupert Firth. He is often referred to as the father of collocation. Firth defines collocations as statements of the habitual or customary places of that word order. He highlights that such a word or a 'piece' is not a mere juxtaposition but rather an order of mutual expectancy; (Firth, qtd. in Dimike 2014). Hence, collocation plays a vital role in fluency, naturalness, and meaning in language use. So, its misuse results in speech or writing that sounds unnatural or incorrect to standard language use.

Similarly, Benson, Benson, and Ilson (2010) define collocation as **an arbitrary and recurrent word combination according to accepted usage** (2010). In their dictionary, they divided collocation into lexical (L) and grammatical collocation (G). Lexical collocation consists of nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs and is classified into seven:

L1 = Verb (creates, performs, or causes an action) + Noun e.g. make a decision, launch a missile, compose music, quench one's thirst, deliver a speech.

L2 = Verb + Noun (the noun is affected or eradicated) e.g. reject an appeal, crush resistance, cancel a meeting, abolish a law.

L3 = Adjective + Noun e.g. strong tea, crushing defeat, heavy rainfall, sweeping generalization, deep sleep.

L4 = Noun + Verb e.g. bombs explode, bees buzz, volcanoes erupt, engines roar, dogs bark.

L5 = Noun + Noun (Quantifier/Classifier + Noun) e.g. a swarm of bees, a bouquet of flowers, a loaf of bread, a bar of chocolate.

L6 = Adverb + Adjective e.g. deeply absorbed, highly unusual, hopelessly addicted, closely acquainted. These express degree, manner, or intensity where the adverb modifies the adjective.

L7 = Verb + Adverb e.g. apologize humbly, argue heatedly, suffer quietly, thank sincerely.

Grammatical collocation, on the other hand, consists of a dominant word plus a particle. The first consists of the main word (a noun,

an adjective, a verb) plus a preposition or 'to+ infinitive' or 'that-clause.' Grammatical collocation is characterized by eight basic classifications:

G1 = Verb + Preposition e.g. rely on, believe in, agree with, deal with, hope for.

G2 = Noun + Preposition e.g. interest in, reason for, blockade against, apathy towards, responsibility for.

G3 = Adjective + Preposition =e.g. fond of, angry at, good at, afraid of, familiar with.

G4 = Verb + To-infinitive e.g. want to go, hope to win, attempt to leave, agree to help.

G5 = Verb + That e.g. He said that she was right. She believed that he would come. They assumed that we knew.

G6 = Verb + Wh-clause e.g. She asked where he went. They didn't know what to do. I wondered why he resigned.

G7 = Verb + Gerund e.g. admit stealing, avoid going, consider leaving, enjoy reading.

G8 = Verb + Noun + To-infinitive e.g. She told him to go. They asked her to help. He wanted me to stay.

Colligation

The term colligation originates from the Latin verb, colligāre, meaning, "to bind or to tie together;" col means 'together' and ligāre means 'to tie or bind'. Though its general usage appeared in English as early as the 17th century, the word gained a specialized technical meaning in the mid-19th century. Whewell (1847) introduced the concept of "colligation of facts" to describe the intellectual act of bringing together isolated observations under a unifying concept or hypothesis. The linguistic application of colligation emerged much later, notably in the work of John Rupert Firth in the 1950s. He asserts that a word's meaning is partly determined by its "company" according to its association with particular grammatical categories and structures, this, he termed, 'colligation, Firth (1957). Firth introduced colligation to describe the interrelation of grammatical categories in syntactical structures.

He emphasized that meaning arises both from individual words and their typical grammatical environments. For instance, the verb, *decide* often colligates with a to-infinitive form, as in, *to decide, to read, to study*, etc. So, colligation in linguistics refers to the grammatical company word keeps.

Mansoor (2016) sees colligational patterns as the syntactic preferences that words exhibit when they occur in structurally fixed combinations. Unlike collocation, colligation highlights how words tend to combine with specific grammatical categories or structures, such as verb forms, noun phrases, or prepositional phrases. Mansoor notes that colligation is a crucial part of a word's behaviour in natural discourse because it reflects not just what words go together, but also how they function grammatically within a sentence. For example, certain adjectives tend to be followed by infinitives, *eager to leave*, or by prepositional phrases, *interested in music*, indicating consistent colligational tendencies. He classifies these colligational patterns into several grammatical groupings based on the structural preferences of words. They include:

a. Noun + Preposition: This type of colligation according to Hill (2001) and Lewis (2002), involves a noun followed by a particular preposition. Such combinations are often fixed and semantically strong and function almost as single units. These structures are relatively rigid and allow minimal substitution; they often become idiomatic and are best learned as fixed patterns. Examples by (Benson et al. 2010),

1) i. pride in one's achievements ii. fulfillment of a promise
iii. addiction to drugs iv. need for attention
v. protest against injustice vi. ignorance of the law
vii. support for the proposal viii. respect for elders
ix. interest in science

b. Preposition + Noun**:** This category includes fixed prepositional phrases where a preposition precedes a noun sometimes followed by another preposition. These constructions typically carry idiomatic meanings and exhibit strong grammatical cohesion, (Francis, Hunston, and Manning 1996). Their examples include:

2) i. in charge of ii. in advance iii. under the patronage of
iv. in demand v. out of reach vi. in compliance with
vii. at risk of viii. at the expense of ix. in reference to

c. Adjective + Preposition: Adjectives frequently colligate with specific prepositions forming stable and predictable grammatical units. These combinations form part of the grammar lexicon and are crucial for expressing evaluation and emotion. Examples include:

3) i. afraid of failure ii. satisfied with the results
iii. famous for generosity
iv. good at drawing v. worried about the outcome
vi. jealous of success
vii. interested in music viii. proud of her children
ix. responsible for the damage

Constraints

Constraints in language, according to Halliday (1994) is the systematic rules that govern the relationship between syntax (sentence structure) and lexis (vocabulary) in communication. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) submit that these constraints function as linguistic boundaries that shape how words can be combined to produce grammatically and semantically coherent utterances.

The notion of constraints in the opinion of Firth (1957) refers to the systematic restrictions or patterns that govern the combinations

of words and grammatical structures in natural language. He maintains that these constraints shape what is considered natural, idiomatic, or acceptable usage within a language adding that they operate at multiple levels including lexical (word choice) and syntactic (grammatical structure), and as such, are crucial for maintaining clarity, precision and fluency in both spoken and written discourse.

Deviance

The term *deviance* denotes a linguistic departure from the accepted lexical and syntactic norms of a Standard English. Leech (1969) defines linguistic deviance as a deliberate or unintentional departure from established norms of expression. He emphasizes that every deviation presupposes a standard against which it is measured. Crystal and Davy (1969) extend this view by arguing that deviation at times reflects conscious or unconscious adaptation to local linguistic and cultural realities not just from ignorance. Such forms, though locally intelligible, differ from the conventions of Standard English. From a functional standpoint, Sinclair (1991) explains that deviance arises when words fail to follow the habitual co-occurrence patterns of standard speakers and often leads to non-idiomatic or unnatural expressions.

However, scholars differ in their views of linguistic deviance. While Leech (1969) and Sinclair (1991) see deviation as a marker of non-standard usage that should be avoided in formal writing like newspaper editorials, Bamgbose (1998) and Kachru (1985) give it a different interpretation. According to them, it as an indicator of nativization; that is the creative adaptation of English to local communicative needs. From this perspective, deviations in Nigerian English illustrate linguistic innovation and cultural identity rather than error. Nevertheless, while such adaptations may enrich linguistic diversity, persistent deviations in formal written discourse undermine clarity, professionalism, and global intelligibility. Therefore, within the frameworks of collocation and

colligation, deviance reflects violations of established co-occurrence constraints, lexical or syntactic which produce awkward or non-idiomatic expressions despite being grammatically correct.

Priming

Priming refers to a mental state shaped by an individual's prior linguistic experiences rather than a fixed entity that can be consciously acquired. Within Lexical Priming Theory (LPT), priming functions largely at a subconscious level. Each time a person encounters a word, they implicitly record the linguistic context in which it occurs. Over time, these repeated encounters cause the word to develop characteristic associations, (primings) that guide how it is used and understood in discourse.

According to Hoey (2005) and O'Donnell et al. (2013), these primings are dynamic and personal rather than uniform or prescriptive. They evolve through continual exposure to language, with each new instance of use either strengthening or weakening existing associations. Thus, primings vary from one speaker to another, reflecting individual linguistic histories, domains of interaction, and the genres of discourse in which the language user typically engages.

For instance, the word ***commit*** is usually primed to co- occur with negative nouns rather than positive ones. So, *commit a crime*, an *offence* or a *suicide sound more natural than commit a good deed* even though it is grammatically possible. In colligational pattern also, ***depend*** is primed to co-occur with the preposition *on*, not *in* or *at*. This gives naturalness to *depend on someone* but awkwardness to *depend in someone*.

Theoretical Framework

The theory adopted for this study is the Lexical Priming Theory of Hoey (2005). This is a usage-based theory developed by Michael

Hoey since the late 1990s and fully articulated in his 2005 work, *Lexical Priming: A New Theory of Words and* Language. It provides a valuable lens through which deviance in collocation and colligation constraints in editorial writing is examined. The theory posits that language is fundamentally structured by how words are used in real-world contexts rather than being solely governed by abstract grammatical rules (Hoey 2005). Its core argument stems from the observation that words are primed for use through an individual's cumulative experience or repeated exposure to those words. This accumulated knowledge accumulated explains the fluency, creativity, and naturalness exhibited by language users. Core assumptions of this theory include:

i. **Language Use is Experiential:** Hoey assumes that language is learned primarily through experience not through the internalization of abstract grammatical rules.
ii. **Words are Primed through Repeated Use:** Whenever individuals read or hear a word in a certain context, their brains subconsciously record this pattern. Over time, the individuals become primed to expect such word to occur in similar lexical or grammatical environment.
iii. **Priming is Individual and Cultural:** While each speaker develops unique primings based on personal linguistic experiences, many primings are also shared within a language community due to shared exposure through education, media, and literature. This shared experience creates communal patterns of usage that define a language variety.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design suitable for analyzing **textual data** drawn from editorial discourse. Through qualitative analysis, the study examines how words combine lexically (collocation) and syntactically (colligation) to form

cohesive and meaningful expressions and how newspaper editorials deviate from the standard norms.

Data are collected through texts. Editorial commentaries are downloaded from the online archives of *Punch* and *Vanguard* newspapers published between January and May 2025. This method ensures validity and reliability of the data analyzed. Each editorial piece is read thoroughly and relevant lexical and grammatical deviance identified. Guided by Hoey's Lexical Priming Theory (2005), selected excerpts from the editorial piece are examined for collocational and colligational deviations from the expected linguistic norms. The deviations identified are coded, categorized, and interpreted to reveal their role in editorial discourse. By focusing on the raw data, the study uses primary sources that directly reflect deviance in collocation and colligation constraints in professional writing.

Factors that Cause Collocation and Colligation Deviations in Nigerian Newspapers

Journalistic writing is shaped by a combination of linguistic competence, stylistic choices, and socio-cultural influences. These deviations often arise when writers either unintentionally depart from established lexical and grammatical patterns or deliberately adapt them to local contexts, audience expectations, and rhetorical goals. These are looked into under the following subheadings:

Limited Exposure to Standard Input: This refers to situations where writers have insufficient contact with the natural collocational and colligational patterns used by standard speakers. Cases like this makes journalists rely heavily on direct translations from their mother tongue, formal dictionary meanings or overly literal constructions rather than on idiomatic usage. This leads to expressions that, though grammatically recognisable, sound awkward, odd or unfamiliar to proficient readers of Standard English. In Nigerian newspapers, this manifests in phrases and structures that deviate from common native patterns and so

hampers clarity, fluency, and reader engagement. These can be seen from certain expressions like: ***With its shallow electricity output of less than 5,000 megawatts***. A standard expression would use ***low***, ***poor***, **or** ***limited electricity output,*** **and not** ***shallow***. This deviation suggests reliance on a literal of *shallow* without awareness of its restricted collocational range in this context. ***With the right political will and a top-bottom reform*** ... The phrase *top-bottom reform* is a non-standard reversal of the conventional *top-down reform*. The choice shows unfamiliarity with the established native metaphor arising from limited exposure to idiomatic political discourse in standard English. ***Shortly after the disturbing video emerged, on the Nigerian social media space***. Standard usage typically omits *the* before *social media* and avoids *space*. So, on *Nigerian social media* or *on social media in Nigeria* is preferred. The presence of *space* here mirrors Nigerian English tendencies and reflects limited exposure to correct usage. ***Not only schools are well funded*** *...* ***but they also*** *...* This deviates from the norm. *Not only are schools… but they also….* The error reflects a gap in familiarity with standard syntactic inversions that occurs with *not only* in formal English. ***Countless international protocol as well as country legislation provide***...Here, *protocol* and *legislation* are uncountable in standard English and so requires pluralisation *protocols*, *legislations*. This mismatch between grammatical number and standard usage suggests limited exposure to standard norms in legal and formal writing (Halliday 1994; Halliday and Matthiessen 2014).

Influence of Mother Tongue: Mother tongue influence occurs when structures, semantic patterns, or idiomatic expressions from a writer's first language (L1) are transferred directly into English. This transfer can affect verb-noun collocations, prepositional choices, nominalisations, and syntactic constructions. It often produces phrases that sound unnatural and semantically vague. In Nigerian newspapers, such interference frequently results in non-standard expressions that reflect L1 logic rather than English

conventions, (Firth 1957; Bamgbose 1998; Kachru 1985). ***…****without giving the already* ***traumatised candidates*** *adequate time to* ***reprogramme themselves…*** The verb *reprogramme* is typically used for machines or systems, not humans. This construction reflects Igbo and Yoruba syntactic transfer where object-verb relationships and agency differ from English norms, thereby producing a phrase that sounds overly technical and impersonal. *JAMB is not a revenue agency but a* ***spender.*** The phrasing mirrors L1 semantic framing where noun + noun relationships are directly transferred. A more idiomatic rendering should be; *JAMB is not a revenue-generating body but rather a spending agency*. *They fault JAMB's intention to* ***communicate to them with bulk Short Message Service****.* This reflects how L1 lexical patterns shape L2 choices. *Bulk Short Message Service* is a literal, formal rendering influenced by bureaucratic English in local contexts; a native-like expression would be *bulk SMS*.

Overreliance on Formal or Technical Vocabulary: Overreliance on formal or technical vocabulary occurs when writers use specialized or bureaucratic terms excessively, often primed by repeated exposure to institutional documents or genre-specific discourse rather than everyday English, (Hoey 2005; Lewis 2002). This tendency perpetuates awkward collocation and colligation in contexts. Most times, these expressions become too stiff, constrained and difficult to process and disrupt the natural flow of editorial writing, as well as, reduce readability and audience engagement. *...and empower them to seamlessly* ***navigate technological education****:* The verb, *navigate* is primed from technical/administrative context and feels unnatural in standard editorial discourse. More preferred alternatives would read; *engage with technological education* or *participate in technological learning*. ***…send corrupt PEPs to at least 50 years in prison.*** The term, *PEPs (Politically Exposed Persons)* is a technical jargon that requires prior knowledge. Its use in a general editorial may reduce accessibility. A more reader-friendly version would be *corrupt*

politicians. ***…get tired of issuing shop-worn condolence messages***. This expresses stiffness. The phrase *shop-worn condolence messages* disrupt the editorial's natural flow. *Get* tired of issuing hackneyed condolence messages would sound more natural.

Hoey's Lexical Priming-Related Factor: In Nigerian newspapers, journalists who are repeatedly exposed to combative, figurative, or media-centric expressions tend to replicate these patterns even when they are exaggerated below standard or contextually inappropriate. This priming reinforces non-standard pairings and exaggerated language that distorts clarity and affects the perceived professionalism of editorials. For instance; *this particular occurrence serves as a stirring stick in the foul smelling broth*... This phrasing reflects habitual exposure to journalistic figuratives. The expression is non-standard and is primed by similar metaphor-heavy reporting and sounds so awkward in formal editorial writing. Another deviance is found in the expression: *This is dangerous, a disincentive for hard work.* The adjective, *disincentive* is correct but pairing it with *dangerous* reflects non-standard lexical chaining. *Disincentive* fits better with *to* or *against* than with *for*, (Hoey 2005). Repeated exposure to certain formalized but awkward pairings in editorial contexts primes journalists to use such structures thereby indirectly violating expected semantic colligational patterns.

Implications of the Deviations in Collocation and Colligation Constraints

Deviations in collocation and colligation constraints have implications on the following:

Language Use

Editorials are written by high-profile professionals whose words carry weight and credibility; therefore, they are widely regarded as authoritative texts. Additionally, since newspapers reach the

widest and most diverse audience, the language used in them is often taken as both reliable and exemplary. Hence, when collocation and colligation constraints are violated in such outlets, the implications on language use are far-reaching, shaping readers' perceptions and potentially spreading unnatural or misleading patterns across the entire populace, (Mansoor 2016; Hill 2001).

Media Discourse

When collocation and colligation constraints are violated, they significantly undermine the communicative goals of media discourse. At the lexical level, incorrect or awkward word pairings like *shallow electricity output*, *endue peace* and *lethal accident* distort meaning, reduce precision, and misinform the audience. At the grammatical and structural level, faulty colligation like broken parallelism, number agreement errors, awkward syntactic ordering disrupt flow and readability, (Crystal and Davy 1969; Sinclair 1991) and may disengage readers or erode the perceived professionalism of the press. These linguistic lapses damage editorial credibility, invite public criticism, and compromise the persuasive or informative power of its journalism.

Education

When students repeatedly meet faulty collocational misalignments in supposedly authoritative texts like editorials, they become primed to see such errors as normal and absorb them into their mental lexicon as correct usage, (Hoey 2005; O'Donnell et al. 2013). For instance, awkward expressions such as *...lifting news…*, *endue peace* or *... bulk Short Message Service* distort idiomaticity and create non-standard lexical pairings that learners might mistakenly accept as correct. Similarly, flawed colligational structures like *...not only schools are well funded... or* subject–verb mismatches such as *26 points is a lamentable score* weaken grammatical competence. Students who encounter these repeatedly may reproduce them in their own speech and writing. Over time, it becomes systematic errors, weakens mastery of formal registers

and poor performance in high-stakes examinations such as JAMB, WASSCE, and NECO.

The influence does not stop there. Undergraduates and graduates alike; even those from the Department of English are not immune. Prolonged exposure to deviant patterns like … navigate technological education, … endue peace …,… out of the total 400 marks; JAMB is not a revenue agency but a spender allow them carry such awkward or unidiomatic structures into academic essays, research projects, and professional communication. This not only undermines their academic success but also affects employability, scholarly credibility and their ability to engage effectively in global academic discourse where precision and standard usage are highly valued. Moreover, most of these university students heavily rely on media and official publications as language models. But when those models contain flawed collocations and colligations, these students replicate such errors in their dissertations, essays, or research papers. This lowers the overall quality of their academic work, diminishes their competitiveness in international academia and undermines the integrity of their academic training. Over time, this **erodes formal language competence, compromises examination performance** and **reduces the authority of teachers and lecturers as linguistic role models.**

Furthermore, teachers of English and university lecturers who regularly read or use such materials in class also fall prey as they unconsciously reinforce non-standard forms. This is particularly damaging in English Language Departments where precision and native-like idiomatic use should be modelled consistently for students who depend on their lecturers as primary linguistic authorities.

Ultimately, linguistic norms are being eroded and everybody is a victim. When widely circulated newspapers repeatedly use

awkward collocations and colligations such as … stirring stick in the foul smelling broth, misaligned technical phrasing like … bulk Short Message Service, they disrupt the shared priming patterns that underlie standard English usage. Since repeated exposure to such forms conditions the public to accept them as normal, erosion of shared lexical expectations sets in and undermines mutual intelligibility between Nigerian English speakers and global audience thereby drastically reducing the communicative power of formal discourse. Owing to the fact that newspaper editorials function as a language model for the general public, these patterns are internalized by all and sundry. The result is a cycle where flawed usage is not only reproduced but becomes part of the accepted linguistic repertoire. This makes correction more difficult in future generations.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that deviations from collocation and colligation constraints in Nigerian newspaper editorials are deep-seated with broad implications. Additionally, owing to the fact that newspapers have large audience, the deviations escalate beyond the media space into education and professional communication, shaping the linguistic practices of students, teachers, and even scholars. If these patterns are left unchecked, there is the risk of normalizing faulty usage and entrenching substandard norms within the wider discourse community.

Therefore, there is the need for greater editorial sensitivity, linguistic training, and exposure to standard norms in order to safeguard communicative precision. Journalists, educators, and language practitioners must recognize the far-reaching influence of editorials and commit to higher standards of usage. By promoting accuracy and coherence in newspaper language, stakeholders can help strengthen not only the persuasive force of the media but also the linguistic competence of the society it serves. In this way, the

media can fulfill its role as both a watchdog and a model of credible, effective communication.

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