



**A CORPUS-BASED STUDY OF THE ENGLISH
SYNONYMS STRONG AND POWERFUL**

BY

THANATHON SUPPARANON

**AN INDEPENDENT STUDY SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
OF MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING
LANGUAGE INSTITUTE
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ABSTRACT

This research conducts a corpus-based analysis of the English synonyms *strong* and *powerful*, examining their collocational patterns and degrees of formality across different genres. Utilizing data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), the study explores noun collocates, contextual and frequency patterns uses in academic writing, newspapers, magazines, fiction, and spoken discourse. The findings show that *strong* appears much more often and demonstrates greater versatility than *powerful* in all genres, suggesting it is more widely applicable in both formal and informal settings. Furthermore, *strong* most frequently collocates with nouns related to Support and Relationships such as *support*, *bond*, and *connection*. By contrast, *powerful* tends to co-occur with nouns from the Equipment domain and often appears with terms linked to Weapons, Force, and Natural Phenomena such as *force*, *weapon*, and *storm* emphasizing notions of impact and control. These results indicate that although *strong* and *powerful* function as loose synonyms, their differing thematic associations and usage patterns across registers mean they are not fully interchangeable. The study also offers pedagogical insights, stressing the importance of understanding these subtle differences to promote more accurate and contextually appropriate language use.

Keywords: Synonyms, corpus-based analysis, collocation, degree of formality

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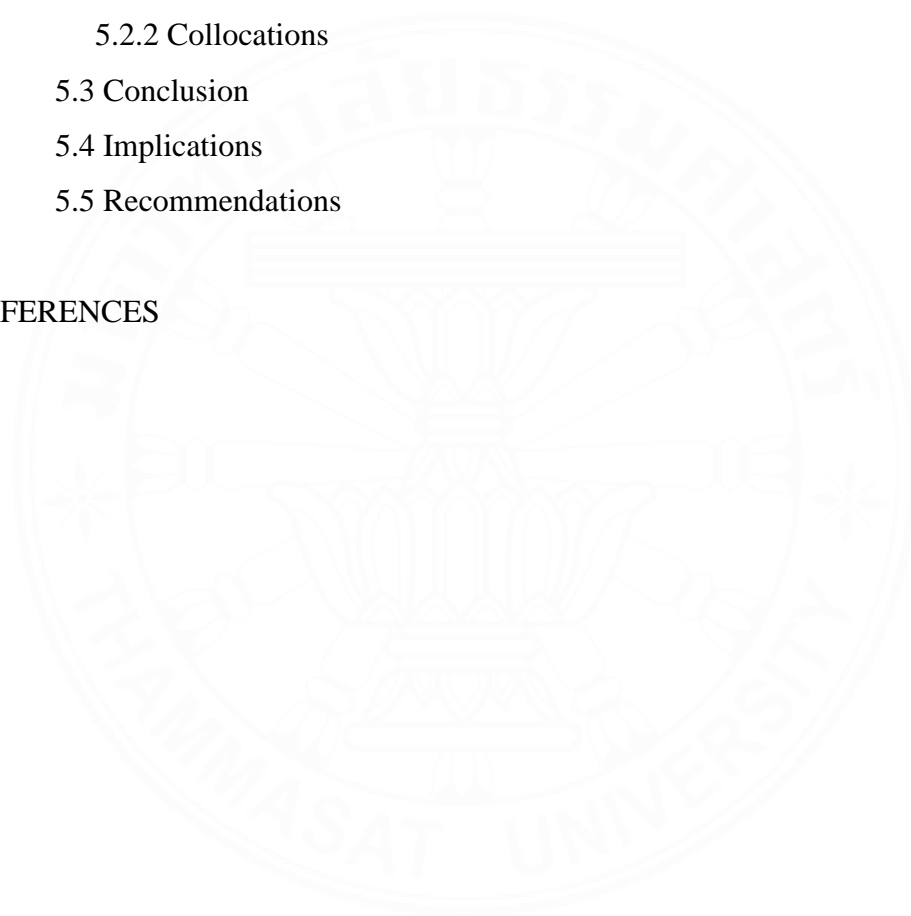
Thanathon Supparanon

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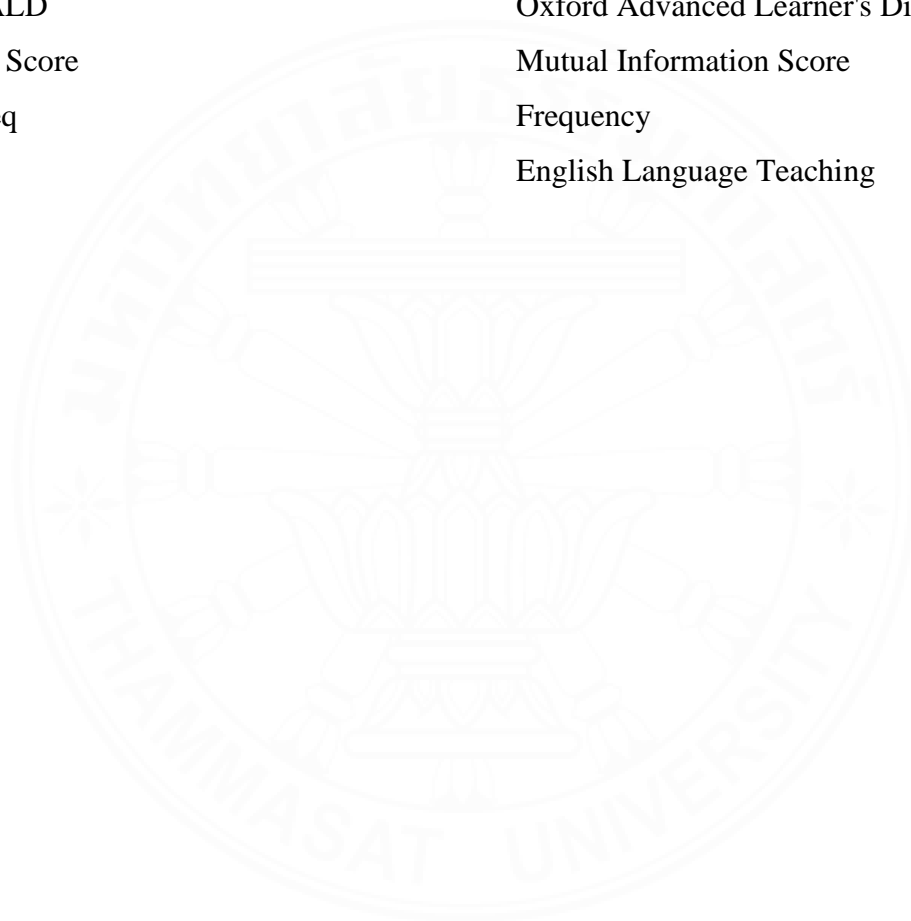
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Symbols/Abbreviations	Terms
L2	Second language
COCA	Corpus of Contemporary American English
OALD	Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary
MI Score	Mutual Information Score
Freq	Frequency
	English Language Teaching



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Vocabulary is the important part for language learning, acting as the foundation of effective communication. Having good language skills is not only the ability to articulate ideas clearly, but also listening and reading skills. Gass and Selinker (2008) identify that to develop the vocabulary is challenging for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners who often struggle with both the quantity and depth of vocabulary knowledge. A large vocabulary helps learners to engage in conversation and convey complex ideas, supporting their entire language learning process.

Synonyms are words with similar meanings that differ in connotation, context, and usage. Taylor (2002) defines synonyms as the phenomenon in which multiple lexical elements can convey the same meaning. Synonyms are important for effective communication. It reduces repetition and keeps communication engaging. In addition, synonyms allow the speaker to express the difference of meaning that are vital skills for communicating sensitively.

Although there are many benefits of synonyms, learners often encounter several barriers to using them. Webb (2007) claims that learners may confuse words with similar meaning because they are unfamiliar with the difference and complicity of each word, especially L2 learners who are unable to distinguish between loose synonyms without sufficient semantic ability. Lee and Liu (2009) point out that reviewing only the dictionary is not sufficient for understanding the synonyms because dictionaries do not account for context or grammatical patterns that influence word choice for learners

To address this issue, the large database of using English in real world situations can greatly develop vocabulary skills for learners by providing concrete examples of how words and synonyms are used in different situations. Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) exposes learners to the real-world usage of synonyms which COCA can identify the difference in collocation and degree of formality. This corpus-based approach engages learners to understand the words in

depth by demonstrating how words function in real-world conversations, rather than learning words in isolation. Therefore, learners can manage synonym usage in their speaking and writing.

The aim of this study is to investigate the degree of formality and noun collocates of the synonyms *strong* and *powerful*. The study intends to analyze the frequency of each adjective in the various genres, for example academic text, magazine and fiction to determine the degree of formality. In addition, the study aims to analyze the nouns used with the two adjectives and group them according to semantic preferences. This is intended to help in understanding how the noun collocates associated with each adjective are similar or different. The result of this study aims to contribute to the understanding of synonymy and the role of these adjectives in different genres and collocations.

1.2 Research Objectives

- 1) To identify the similarities and differences in terms of the degree of formality of the synonymous adjectives *strong* and *powerful*.
- 2) To identify the similarities and differences in terms of collocation of the synonymous adjectives *strong* and *powerful*.

1.3 Research Questions

- 1) What are the similarities and differences in terms of the degree of formality of the synonymous adjectives *strong* and *powerful*?
- 2) What are the similarities and differences in terms of collocation of the synonymous adjectives *strong* and *powerful*?

1.4 Definitions of Key Terms

1.4.1 Synonyms

Synonyms refer to words that share the same core meaning. However, synonyms cannot generally be used interchangeably in all contexts, as they may differ in connotation, usage, or grammatical patterns. For example, *shut* is a synonym of *closed*, but their usage may vary depending on the context.

1.4.2 Strict or Absolute Synonyms

Strict or absolute synonyms refer to a group of words which are identical in meaning and can be used in place of one another in any given context without changing the meaning or style of a sentence. In reality, pure synonyms are almost impossible to find, as most words need to be understood in terms of the subtleties of meaning and usage that characterize their occurrence in context.

1.4.3 Loose or Near-Synonyms

Loose or near-synonyms are words that share similar meanings but are not interchangeable in every context. These words can differ in terms of nuance, emphasis, and grammatical usage. For example, find and discover are near-synonyms, yet they are used in different contexts and can carry distinct shades of meaning.

1.4.4 Corpora

Corpora refers to a large regularized set of texts or linguistic data, which can be used as a linguistic resource for linguistic studies. Corpora enable linguistic researchers to analyze patterns and frequencies of language use in different discursive spaces and, therefore, to receive clues about lexical richness, grammar, and colloquial utterances.

1.4.5 Concordance Lines

Concordance lines are specific instances where a particular word or phrase appears within a corpus. These lines provide contextual examples of how words are used in sentences, allowing researchers and learners to analyze patterns, collocation, and usage across different contexts.

1.4.6 Collocation

Collocations are frequent co-occurrences of a word with another word or words, more often than would be expected by chance. Collocations give natural-sounding language and the kind of vocabulary used by native speakers, showing learners in which contexts words are used.

1.4.7 COCA

COCA stands for the Corpus of Contemporary American English, a sizeable, densely tagged corpus of American English, to which a wider array of genres has been added, such as spoken language, fiction, newspapers, and academic journals. COCA is a valuable resource for linguists, English language learners, and teachers to analyze patterns of occurrence, synonyms, and grammatical patterns for any word or phrase.

1.5 Scope of the Study

This study examines the English adjectives *strong* and *powerful*, focusing on their usage across varied linguistic contexts. The primary aim is to compare their degree of formality and collocation. Specifically, the researchers will analyze their occurrences in a selected corpus that includes texts from diverse genres, ranging from spoken language to literature, journalism, and academic writing.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This research has practical relevance as it offers insights into the usage of two closely related adjectives *strong* and *powerful* in different text types. By examining their frequency, distribution, and common collocates, the study highlights how these words are used.

1.7 Organization of the Study

The research is divided into five chapters as follows:

1.7.1 Chapter one provides the background, the research questions, the definition of terms, scope, significance, and the structure of the study.

1.7.2 Chapter two reviews the concept of synonyms, criteria for distinguishing synonyms, Corpora/Corpus, and related past studies.

1.7.3 Chapter three outlines the target synonyms, research instruments, the data collection and data analysis method.

1.7.4 Chapter four reports and discusses the results of the research, including the commonalities and differences in the degree of formality and noun collocates of *strong* and *powerful*.

1.7.5 The last chapter is the conclusion, in which the summary of the study, the summary of the findings, the conclusion, and recommendations for future research are presented.



CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter presents the literature in four main areas: (1) synonyms, (2) criteria for distinguishing synonyms, (3) corpora/corpus, and (4) related past studies.

2.1 Synonyms

2.1.1 *The Concept of Synonyms*

The term *synonyms* refers to words or phrases that have a similar meaning or nearly the same meaning as another word or phrase in the same language (Crystal, 2008, p. 459). Synonyms are defined as words or phrases that have similar meanings within a language (Hornby, 2010). In other words, synonyms allow communicators to convey similar ideas through different word choices, which allows for flexibility and expression in language use in writing and speaking.

Synonyms are valuable in language use, as they allow for stylistic variation and help prevent repetition in writing. As Thornbury (2002) points out, the ability to understand and appropriately use synonyms enables learners to select the most appropriate words for different contexts, thereby enhancing both fluency and accuracy. Furthermore, learning synonyms not only broadens vocabulary but also improves language skills, enhancing reading comprehension and developing writing proficiency by equipping learners with multiple expressions for similar meanings.

Synonyms can be difficult for students because there's a fine line between closely related synonyms and the word choice changes the tone or voice in the sentence. For example, although *assist* and *help* express the same notion providing *help*, *assist* is frequently used more in formal and professional settings, whereas *help* is more habitual in everyday discourse (Biber et al., 1999).

Synonymy is highly context-dependent. As Crystal (2003) notes, the appropriateness of a synonym can neither be universal nor necessarily justified by current cultural norms or an individual speaker's choice patterns. For example, while *happy* and *content* both describe positive emotional states, they convey different degrees and levels of feeling. *Happy* may imply a more intense or excitable emotion, whereas *content* suggests a more longer-lasting sense of satisfaction.

For this reason, an insight into the synonyms and their meaning nuances, even to their relevance and appropriateness in use is needed for those learners who are trying to increase their language competence.

2.1.2 Strict (*Perfect or Absolute*) and Loose (*Near*) Synonyms

Synonyms can be classified into two categories: strict (perfect or absolute) synonyms and loose (near) synonyms. According to Taylor (2002, p. 262), strict synonyms can be used interchangeably without changing the meaning and style. In these cases, substituting one word for another does not affect the interpretation of the sentence. However, many linguists question whether strict synonyms truly exist. As Chung (2011) notes, it is rare to find words that can be substituted in every context, given the nuances of language and contextual variations. The idea of perfect synonymy is not that simple. As Taylor (2002) points out, near synonyms, if not full synonyms. While two words may overlap in some applications, they almost always convey distinct connotations, register, or level of formality. For example, *big* and *large* may be the same as synonyms, but "big" may be a more casual or colloquial word, and "large" may be more neutrally or formally used in some situation.

Loose (or near) synonyms are words that share a similar meaning but cannot always be used interchangeably. Cruse (1986, p. 267) describes these words as having overlapping meanings but differing in nuances, register, or usage constraints. Inkpen and Hirst (2006) further clarify that near-synonyms are not fully substitutable because they may differ slightly in meaning, connotation, or grammatical and collocational requirements. For instance, the verbs *fix* and *repair* can be used similarly in some contexts, as in the mechanic promised to *fix/repair* the engine. However, these words may differ in other contexts where the connotations or implications of each word vary. The difference in synonyms can be categorized into four types: 1) denotational variations, which involve differences in literal meaning, such as propositional aspects and imprecise or fuzzy meanings; 2) stylistic variations, which relate to differences in dialect or levels of formality (register); 3) expressive variations, which capture emotional or attitudinal differences in meaning; and 4) structural variations, which encompass differences in word combinations (collocations) and grammatical structures (Edmonds, 1999, as cited in Edmonds & Hirst, 2002).

2.2 Criteria for Distinguishing Synonyms

The criteria that the present study focuses on are the degree of formality and collocation.

2.2.1 *The Degree of Formality*

The formality of synonymy is a significant dimension in linguistic studies that affects how language is used in different contexts. Biber, Conrad, and Leech (2002) identified several registers of language, ranging from formal academic writing to informal spoken communication. Formal synonyms are often preferred in academic, legal, and professional writing, whereas informal synonyms are more common in everyday conversation and casual writing. For instance, "*assist*" (formal) and help (informal) are semantically equivalent but vary in their register.

2.2.2 *Collocations*

The term 'collocation', was introduced in the early 1950s by the British linguist J.R. Firth, who saw collocation as the co-occurrence of words in predictable patterns. Firth (1957) is best known for his aphorism "You shall know a word by the company it keeps," meaning the words it tends to occur with, apparently stressing the dependence of meaning and use of lexical items in word combinations. This understanding formed the basis for collocation research in both theoretical and applied linguistics.

Collocation is described in The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE) 5th edition (2014) as "the way particular words are used together, or a particular combination of words used in this way" (p. 336). Certainly, phrases such as "commit a crime" are recognized as stereotypical collocates in English.

The concept of collocation is defined by Sinclair (1991) as "two or more words co-occurring in close proximity in a text" (p. 170). O'Keeffe et al. (2007) state that "collocations are not rigid or absolute but rather they are probabilistic, being ones that... speakers of a language hear time and time again..." (p. 59). Collocation can be extended to words which do not stand for semantically related concepts but with which a word often collocates in natural language (Lindquist, 2009): "the relationship

between a word and the separate word forms that occur in its immediate environment around which they occur frequently" (p. 57).

Hill (2000) divides collocations into two types: strong collocations and weak collocations. A strong collocation is a frequently occurring combination of words whose elements tend to be indispensable. For instance, fast food: the adjective "fast" tends to be joined, just as fast food usually is, at least in America, to "food," which represents food prepared rapidly in some restaurant. Conversely, a weak collocation is any two words that tend to co-occur, but whose relationship to each other is not completely restricted. They could all be easily replaced by other words and the lines would still work, e.g., nice day - the adjective "nice" can be put with a variety of different nouns (e.g., 'nice weather', "nice person") to produce different but not necessarily disjoint senses.

2.3 Corpora/Corpus

Brazil (1995) defines a corpus as "an instance of used language," which is constituted by words and specific expressions that are used naturally in diverse situations and "in which speakers have access to it." A corpus refers to a method of linguistic research that relies on electronic collections of naturally occurring written or spoken texts, which are preserved and accessed on a computer for analysis (Granger, 1998; O'Keeffe, McCarthy & Carter, 2007). This method provides a way to both qualitatively and quantitatively study language. One of the major benefits of corpus studies is that the size of the corpora enables the analysis of similar and different language registers, including academic writing and spoken language (Conrad, 1999). A corpus allows the study of language by statistical and qualitative analysis. The frequency of words in specific contexts is the subject of this paper where the central question is if some words occur more often than others using statistical analysis. By contrast, qualitative analysis is the way words or phrases are used in a body of text, which could mean studying concordance lines for language patterns. Ma and Wang (2016) claim that no single resource can offer all the required linguistic information, nor answer every possible research question.

For that reason, it is important which corpus you choose for corpus analysis. When preparing a corpus, multiple aspects of linguistic features have to be taken into account, like medium, level of technicality, genre, topic, and the setting of the task. For instance, in order to compare language use of English versus non-English speaking learners, Granger (2008) compiled the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE), a 2.5-million-word corpus with learners of 11 different first-language backgrounds. Then the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology Learner Corpus, 25 million words of Chinese English learners were used in the analysis but this corpus is valuable in that it provides the contrast between native English speakers and foreign language learners, especially the contrast between Chinese English learners and native English speakers.

Hunston (2002) argues that corpora contain empirical evidence of language use which may strengthen and support (or even replace) native speakers' intuitions as these have not always proved to be an unbiased source of language data. Even the more advanced native speakers can find it difficult to remember a language construct when they need it. As a result, L2 learner corpora are indispensable and increasingly important in the study of second language research as well as in language education, including the systematic exploration of how L2 learners gradually acquire a second language, at the lexical and syntactic levels, and how their L1 plays a role in shaping this process.

O'Keeffe, McCarthy and Carter (2007) stress the degree to which corpora aids linguistic intuition and this point is particularly relevant in relation to grammar and semantics, which newspapers may be unreliable in. Moreover, software programs such as corpora software, and Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) enable learners to access or interact with corpus-based resources such as concordance lines (Johns, 1991). This is a process that is dependent on locating linguistic patterns as provided and using them in making generalizations about how language is used. This method, referred to as "DDL," is expected to help learners lead to vocabulary and language acquisition.

2.4 Previous Related Studies

Many previous studies have also used corpus-based data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) to examine the similarities and differences of synonyms regarding meaning, collocations, formality, and grammar dependencies. The lexical, syntactic, and stylistic features of five synonyms *ask*, *beg*, *plead*, *request*, and *appeal* were explored in the study of Phoocharoensil (2010). The lexico-semantic analysis covered the referential meaning, connotative meaning, and collocations of them, and the syntactic analysis concentrated on the syntactic structure in which these synonyms appeared. For stylistic properties, the study also considered the formality-context in which the words occur. Three learners' dictionaries (OLAD, 2005; LDOCE, 2009; and CALD, 2009) were paired with the corpus data to cross-reference the two resources. The results confirmed that a corpus database offers more specific information than learners' dictionaries. The findings showed that the five synonyms had the same central meaning of requesting someone to perform an action. The extended meanings slightly differed from each other though. *Beg* has the speaker concerned or in a hurry. *plead* implies a more high-stakes type of situation, so it carries more gravity than *ask*. *Request* is related to politeness and formality and *appeal* signifies formality, seriousness, and urgency, mostly in the legal domain. This study has also shown that synonyms cannot be used altogether interchangeably in all cases, as a result of differences in connotations, collocations, dialect, grammar patterns, and style.

Aroonmanakun (2015) looked into the use of the English adjectives *quick* and *fast* by using corpus data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The study is based on the 100 most frequent collocates of the aforementioned two adjectives and on the nouns that immediately follow them. The findings demonstrated the existence of nouns that are just by themselves connected exclusively with *quick* or *fast*, as well as nouns that can appear adjacent to both *quick* and *fast* but with different meanings. The result reveals *quick* tends to modify the quality or character of an action, and *fast* tends to modify the way the action takes place. This study highlights the contribution of corpus analysis to disambiguating near synonyms in English and may therefore contribute to improving second language learners' vocabulary acquisition and use.

Petcharat and Phoocharoensil (2017) explored three synonymous *adjectives* *acceptable*, *proper*, and *appropriate* taking into account their denotational meanings, stylistic levels, collocations, and syntactic patterns. They compared the denotation of the synonyms in question with three dictionaries: the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 6th edition (2014), the Longman Advanced American Dictionary 3rd edition (2013), and the Macmillan Collocations Dictionary (2010). According to their results, although the three synonyms have a common core meaning, they are not always interchangeable. They also included 300 COCA concordance lines for each synonym as analyzed by AntConc, a corpus-analysis tool, in them. Corpus data was used to gain information on word frequency, formality, collocations, and grammatical usage of the synonyms. The researchers discovered that COCA provided the concordance lines with more detailed information on the formality of synonyms, where the synonyms were assigned different scores based on how much formal contexts they were shown in the concordance lines. *Appropriate* and *proper* were mainly differentiated based on their level of formality, as were *appropriate* and *suitable*; none of the BSD systems significantly drew the distinction between either *proper* and *suitable*, or *appropriate* in general.

Castello (2014) investigated the frequencies of use of *strong* and *powerful* based on the corpus of the Bank of English, with particular regard to British, American, and Australian English. The paper took a qualitative perspective and focused on the syntactic and semantic differences between the two adjectives. But it failed to provide a thorough study of frequency and distribution of the adjectives in different contexts, which is indispensable for understanding their fine uses in different contexts. Moreover, the study refers to collocations, but does not use a quantitative technique to assess their strength, which narrows the examination.

In the current investigation *strong* and *powerful* were examined using the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). By focusing on a contemporary American corpus, the genre-specific usage can be explored, and see how these adjectives are used in eight different genres, such as academic, spoken, fiction, and so on. By examining the use and spread of these terms, my study attempts to offer a wider analytical framework in order to better understand how these terms function in both formal and informal language use, which is not primarily the goal of Castello's

research. Furthermore, the method utilizes MI to rate collocational strength, obtaining a finer context to *strong* and its noun collocations, as well as *powerful* and its noun collocations. In contrast to Castello's exploration of collocations without numerical evidence, which is non-reliant tests, my work highlights the importance of MI values, given that a low value of three effectively guarantees robust collocational connections.



CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The chapter presents (1) the target synonyms (2) the research instrument and (3) data collection and data analysis

3.1 Target Synonyms

The current study focuses on two synonyms strong and powerful and starts with an inquiry into their word frequency in COCA, a corpus reference employed in the present research. These adjectives exist in different contexts or sources and have common meanings in accordance with their definitions in the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary International Student's Edition (10th edition). It is also interesting to note that the two adjectives *strong* and *powerful* are in the Oxford 3000-word list, showing their saliency and high frequency of occurrence in English. These terms are characteristically associated with strength or power, further supporting their importance for interaction in a range of linguistic contexts.

Strong and *powerful* are defined as 'having a lot of physical power or strength' according to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary International Student's Edition (10th edition) below:

Strong (adjective) = Having great physical power or strength; able to do things that require force or effort.

Example: "He is a strong person who can lift heavy weights."

Powerful (adjective) = Having great power or influence; capable of having a strong effect.

Example: "The president is a powerful leader."

This study focuses on two synonymous English adjectives: *strong* and *powerful*. Both words appear frequently in various contexts and are included in common COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English) word frequency lists. Among them, strong appears to be used more often than *powerful*. However, according to Cambridge English Dictionary online, *powerful* was listed as a synonym of *strong*, suggesting that their meanings significantly overlap. For the purposes of this analysis, 300 concordance lines were examined for each of the adjectives strong and *powerful*

3.2 Research Instruments

3.2.1 Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)

COCA, the Corpus of Contemporary American English, is the largest freely available English-language corpus. It contains over one billion words from texts dated up to 2019, compiled from as early as 1990. The corpus spans eight diverse genres: blogs, websites, TV and movie subtitles, spoken dialogue, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, and academic texts. Designed to be balanced and representative, COCA offers users a web-based interface and is regularly updated with new genres and materials.

COCA provides a wide range of features for linguistic analysis, including frequency counts, exact matches, wildcard searches, lemmatization, part-of-speech (POS) tagging, keyword-in-context (KWIC) displays, and the ability to combine these functions. Users can perform searches on individual words, phrases, lemmas, or more complex linguistic structures. One of COCA's distinguishing features is the ability to compare word or phrase usage across different registers, using comprehensive string lists that reveal genre-specific frequency and distribution patterns. This enables users to identify trends, synonym usage, and shifts in language across contexts.

Given its scope, up-to-date content (last revised in 2019), and focus on American English through U.S.-based media sources, COCA was selected as the primary resource for the present research

3.2.2 AntConc

AntConc is a large suite of text analysis tools that include seven functions (you can think of these as tabs in a spreadsheet):

1. The Concordance feature, which enables a search of words and phrases throughout multiple texts.
2. The Concordance Plot, which locates a search result in certain texts.
3. Collocates, a feature representing the collocates of target words.
4. Word List-maker tool, a tool that enumerates and groups words into a list.
5. Clusters/N-Grams which clusters words together.
6. The File View Tool, to inspect the output of other tools.

7. The Keyword List tool, used to identify both very frequent and very infrequent words relative to a reference corpus (Anthony, 2014).

With these functionalities in mind, the researcher used AntConc to generate collocation patterns and grammatical patterns, extract word lists, and rank words in lists by frequency, in particular of nouns following synonyms.

3.3 Data Analysis

This research focuses on two synonymous adjectives: strong and powerful. These adjectives were used to analyze concordance lines in COCA. To investigate and answer the first research question, the study examined the frequency (per million) and distribution patterns of the target synonyms across these genres. For the second research question, the study analyzed the frequency of collocations of the adjectives strong and powerful. The strength of these collocations was measured using frequency of the word and the Mutual Information (MI) score.

According to Smyth (2016), the MI score compares the actual occurrences of a word to the expected occurrences, providing a more precise understanding of the relationship between two words. By using MI, researchers are able to obtain a clearer picture of the word associations than relying on a simple collocation list. The present study specifically explores noun collocates in the top-twenty most frequent phrases in COCA with an MI score of 3 or higher, which is considered significant for collocational relationships (Smyth, 2016).

The data gathered from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) were analyzed using the following steps:

The COCA corpus was initially utilized to examine the frequency and distribution of the two synonyms across eight distinct genres, answering the first research question. This analysis provided valuable insights into the contextual usage of the target words, allowing for an exploration of whether these terms are more prevalent in formal or informal contexts.

The top 20 noun collocates of *strong* and *powerful* were analyzed to identify patterns in their collocational behavior and the semantic fields they evoke. The selection of these collocates was based on their frequency of occurrence and their Mutual Information (MI) score, with a threshold set at three to ensure a strong

association (Schmitt, 2010; Cheng, 2012; Szudarski, 2017; Phoocharoensil, 2022). Finally, these collocates were categorized according to their shared semantic meanings, grouping those with similar connotations together in the same category.



CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After analyzing the information based on the research questions of this study, the results are presented in this chapter. The analysis revealed both similarities and differences in the use of the target words when comparing dictionary definitions with data from the COCA corpus. This chapter is divided into two sections to present the findings.

- 1) Degree Formality
- 2) Collocation

4.1 Degree of Formality

The degree formality of the target synonyms was analyzed to address the first research question, which focuses on how the two synonyms appear across various genres. Since one synonym may be suitable for formal settings while others are not, this serves as a key factor in differentiating between them (Jackson & Amvela, 2010). With regard to formality, the findings reveal that the COCA database offers information not available in the online versions of the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD). As shown in Table 1, the words strong and powerful with varying frequencies across eight genres: blogs, general web content, magazines, TV/movies, academic writing, newspapers, spoken language, and fiction.

Table 1

The adjective strong and powerful is distributed across eight different genres according to frequency.

Genre	Strong Frequency	Per million	Genre	Powerful Frequency	Per million
Academic	23104	192.87	Magazine	13931	110.48
texts	21194	168.08	Webpage	11725	94.36
Magazine	20955	172.13	Academic	11531	96.31
Newspaper	20448	162.57	Texts	10084	78.41
Webpage	19896	157.74	Blogs	8970	73.68
Spoken	19783	153.82	Newspaper	8861	70.25
Blogs	13855	117.10	Spoken	5880	49.69
Fiction	12770	99.71	Fiction	5822	45.46
TV			TV		
Total	152005	153.82	Total	76810	77.35

The frequency data in Table 1 shows usage differences between the synonyms *strong* and *powerful* across various genres. Overall, *strong* is significantly more frequent, with a total of 152,005 occurrences (153.82 per million), compared to *powerful*, which appears 76,810 times (77.35 per million). This indicates that *strong* is generally preferred in English usage across all examined genres.

In academic texts, *strong* occurs at a rate of 192.87 per million words, with a total frequency of 23,104. It is highly frequent in scholarly contexts. In newspapers, *strong* appears at 172.13 per million with a total of 20,955 occurrences. Magazines show a frequency of 168.08 per million (21,194 occurrences), and web content at 162.57 per million (11,725 occurrences). In spoken language, *strong* occurs at 157.74 per million with 19,896 instances. Fiction texts feature *strong* at 117.10 per million (13,855 occurrences), and TV shows at 99.71 per million with 12,770 instances.

Powerful appears less frequently overall. In academic texts, it occurs at 96.31 per million, with 11,531 occurrences; in magazines, 110.48 per million (13,931 occurrences); newspapers at 73.68 per million (8,970 occurrences); web content at

94.36 per million (11,725 occurrences); blogs at 78.41 per million (10,084 occurrences); spoken language at 70.25 per million (8,861 occurrences); fiction at 49.69 per million (5,880 occurrences); and TV at 45.46 per million (5,822 occurrences).

The data suggest that *strong* and *powerful* are used across a range of genres and registers, suggesting a different overall level of formality in their usage. *Strong* appears more frequently across all genres, including both informal and formal contexts, demonstrating its wider versatility. Both adjectives function across different registers with different levels of formality, therefore *strong* exhibits greater overall usage and versatility

Regarding the degree of formality of *strong* and *powerful*, the data indicate that *strong* tends to have a higher degree of formality compared to *powerful* across various genres, including formal contexts such as academic texts, newspapers, and magazines, where *strong* appears more frequently per million words (e.g., 192.87 in academic texts) than *powerful* (e.g., 96.31 in the same genre). The higher frequency of *strong* across formal genres suggests that it is more acceptable and appropriate in formal settings, making it the more formal of the two in general usage. Conversely, *powerful* is used less frequently in formal genres and is more often associated with semi-formal or informal contexts, implying a lower degree of formality overall.

Therefore, based on the corpus data, *strong* has a higher degree of formality, being more prevalent in formal settings, while *powerful* tends to be more informal or semi-formal, which accounts for its lower overall frequency in formal contexts.

4.2 Collocation

4.2.1 Collocates of Strong and Powerful

This study examined the collocations of the adjectives *strong* and *powerful* to identify any differences in their usage. Specifically, the research focuses on adjective + noun combinations, as the target words are adjectives. The data was collected the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA). The results revealed how each adjective collocates with nouns, both in singular and plural forms, as shown through concordance lines.

Table 2*Noun Collocates of Strong and Powerful in COCA*

Genre	Strong Noun Collocation	Frequency	MI Value	Genre	Powerful Noun Collocation	Frequency	MI Value
1	<i>support</i>	2523	3.40	1	<i>force</i>	1875	3.85
2	<i>wind</i>	1882	3.94	2	<i>tool</i>	1786	5.02
3	<i>economy</i>	1790	3.05	3	<i>weapon</i>	648	3.41
4	<i>feeling</i>	1726	3.28	4	<i>influence</i>	525	3.84
5	<i>tie</i>	912	4.06	5	<i>engine</i>	381	3.60
6	<i>connection</i>	888	3.07	6	<i>storm</i>	359	3.27
7	<i>supporter</i>	867	3.95	7	<i>ally</i>	274	3.75
8	<i>correlation</i>	865	4.65	8	<i>symbol</i>	246	3.80
9	<i>presence</i>	858	3.05	9	<i>incentive</i>	242	3.99
10	<i>leadership</i>	851	3.06	10	<i>emotion</i>	230	3.22
11	<i>bond</i>	818	3.62	11	<i>telescope</i>	184	3.93
12	<i>influence</i>	765	3.04	12	<i>earthquake</i>	146	3.88
13	<i>desire</i>	753	3.15	13	<i>magic</i>	123	3.18
14	<i>suit</i>	696	3.01	14	<i>reminder</i>	121	3.64
15	<i>predictor</i>	682	5.66	15	<i>explosion</i>	111	3.03
16	<i>opposition</i>	676	3.43	16	<i>jaw</i>	99	3.50
17	<i>commitment</i>	672	3.23	17	<i>processor</i>	97	3.71
18	<i>signal</i>	609	3.25	18	<i>current</i>	72	3.86
19	<i>advocate</i>	576	3.75	19	<i>bloc</i>	47	4.19
20	<i>emotion</i>	562	3.17	20	<i>wizard</i>	79	3.72

Based on their frequency and MI scores (≥ 3), Table 2 lists the top 20 noun collocations that frequently occur with the two target words. As can be seen, there are three noun collocates that are shared by the two target synonyms.

Table 2 shows the most common nouns that are used with the adjectives *strong* and *powerful*. These adjectives have some similar collocates, like *influence* and *emotion*, which are often used to describe human impact and feelings.

For the word *strong*, the noun *support* occurs most frequently (2,523 times), followed by *wind* (1,882 times), *economy* (1,790 times), *feeling* (1,726 times), *tie* (912 times), *connection* (888 times), *supporter* (867 times), *correlation* (865 times), *presence* (858 times), *leadership* (851 times), *bond* (818 times), *influence* (765 times),

desire (753 times), suit (696 times), predictor (682 times), opposition (676 times), commitment (672 times), signal (609 times), advocate (576 times), and emotion (562 times), respectively.

For the word *powerful*, the top twenty noun collocates with high MI values include force (1,875 times), followed by tool (1,786 times), weapon (648 times), influence (525 times), engine (381 times), storm (359 times), ally (274 times), symbol (246 times), incentive (242 times), emotion (230 times), telescope (184 times), earthquake (146 times), magic (123 times), reminder (121 times), explosion (111 times), jaw (99 times), processor (97 times), current (72 times), bloc (47 times), and wizard (79 times), respectively.

The results in Table 2 show that both *strong* and *powerful* share some common collocates, such as *influence* and *emotion*. However, they differ in their primary collocational patterns: *strong* is associated with nouns *support*, *tie*, *connection*, and *leadership*. In contrast, *powerful* predominantly collocates with nouns, like *force*, *weapon*, *storm*, and *symbol*. These differences reflect their typical contexts of use, suggesting that while they are loosely synonyms, they are not fully interchangeable due to their distinct collocational preferences and connotations.

4.2.2 Noun Collocates and Semantic Preference

The semantic preference of the synonyms was then examined by categorizing their noun collocates based on shared meanings. Semantic preference describes the tendency of a word to appear with a group of semantically related words (Stubbs, 2001). This shows that semantic preference is shaped by the meaning-based connections between a word and the words it typically appears with.

Table 3*Semantic Preference of Noun Collocates of Strong*

Semantic Categories	Noun collocates
Feelings and Emotions	desire, emotion, feeling, opposition
Influence	leadership, influence
Support and Relationship	advocate, connection, commitment, support, supporter, bond, tie
Abstract Concepts or Ideas	signal, correlation, predictor
Natural Phenomena	wind
Miscellaneous	suit, presence, economy

Table 3 categorizes the noun collocates of *strong* into six themes: Feelings and Emotions, Influence, Support and Relationships, Abstract Concepts, Miscellaneous, and Natural Phenomena. Support and Relationships is the largest group, with nouns like advocate, bond, and support, indicating *strong* often expresses stability and trust. Feelings and Emotions include desire and emotion, showing *strong* intensifies internal states. In Influence, nouns like leadership highlight authority, while in Abstract Concepts, words like signal and predictor convey clarity or certainty. Miscellaneous covers varied uses such as suit and economy, and Natural Phenomena includes wind, emphasizing physical force.

Table4.4*Semantic Preference of Noun Collocates of Powerful*

Semantic Categories	Noun collocates
Weapon and Force	weapon, explosion, force
Influence	influence, incentive, reminder
Equipment	engine, processor, telescope, tool
Natural Phenomena	earthquake, storm, current
Supernatural	magic, wizard, symbol
Support and relationship	ally, bloc
Feeling and Emotion	emotion
Miscellaneous	jaw

Table 4 presents the noun collocates of the adjective *powerful*, grouped into eight thematic categories: Weapon and Force, Influence, Equipment, Natural Phenomena, Supernatural, Support and Relationship, Feeling and Emotion, and Miscellaneous. This categorization demonstrates the varied contexts in which *powerful* is used, revealing its association with strength, impact, and intensity in both literal and metaphorical senses.

The Weapon and Force category includes nouns such as *weapon*, *explosion*, and *force*, emphasizing the physical and often destructive nature of power. These collocates show that *powerful* is commonly used to describe entities capable of exerting dominance or causing significant impact. Phrases like *powerful weapon* or *powerful force* reflect the term's connection with strength, violence, or intensity in military or dynamic settings.

In the Influence category, nouns such as influence, incentive, and reminder reflect more abstract forms of *power*, particularly those related to persuasion, motivation, and cognitive effect. Collocations like *powerful influence* or *powerful incentive* illustrate the role of *powerful* in describing forces that shape behavior, decisions, and perceptions without direct physical action. The Equipment category features nouns such as engine, processor, telescope, and tool, pointing to technological and mechanical strength. These collocates demonstrate how *powerful* is frequently used in technical or industrial contexts to describe machines or devices with exceptional performance or capability, as seen in phrases like *powerful engine* or *powerful processor*.

In the Natural Phenomena category, earthquake, storm, and current represent the immense energy and potential destructiveness of natural forces. Collocations like *powerful earthquake* and *powerful storm* convey intensity and the ability to cause significant environmental change or damage.

The Supernatural category includes magic, wizard, and symbol, illustrating how *powerful* is used in fantastical or symbolic contexts. These nouns show how the adjective conveys mystical, spiritual, or emblematic strength, as in *powerful magic* or *powerful symbol*.

The Support and Relationship category includes collocates like ally and bloc, revealing how *powerful* can describe strong affiliations or alliances, particularly in political or strategic contexts. Expressions such as *powerful ally* suggest strength through association and unity.

In the Feeling and Emotion category, the collocate emotion shows that *powerful* is also used to intensify internal, psychological experiences. The phrase *powerful emotion* reflects how the adjective conveys depth, intensity, and overwhelming affective states.

Lastly, the Miscellaneous category includes the noun jaw, a more isolated and specific use, but one that still conveys strength, as in *powerful jaw*, likely referring to physical capability or threat in both literal and figurative language.

A comparison of Tables 3 and 4 reveals that *strong* and *powerful* share several noun collocates, such as *emotion*, *influence*, and *force*, as well as overlapping thematic categories, including Influence, Feeling and Emotion, Natural Phenomena,

and Support and Relationship. These shared elements suggest a degree of semantic similarity, as both adjectives convey notions of intensity, impact, or strength. However, they are not fully interchangeable in all contexts. For example, *strong commitment* is commonly used, whereas *powerful commitment* is less natural; conversely, *powerful engine* is typical, while *strong engine* is rarely used. The collocation analysis revealed that *strong* predominantly co-occurs with nouns related to the theme of Support and Relationship such as *support, bond, connection, and ties*, indicating its association with relationship. On the other hand, *powerful* is primarily linked with nouns related to the theme of Equipment such as *engine and processor*. In addition, it also collocates with nouns belonging to Weapon and Force, Natural Phenomena, and Supernatural themes like *force, weapon, symbol and storm*, which evoke notions of impact, control, or supernatural phenomena.

In summary, *strong* and *powerful* are loose synonyms, as they share similar meanings but differ in the degree of formality, and collocational patterns. *Strong* appears to have a higher degree of formality than *powerful*. Furthermore, the collocation patterns highlight how the two adjectives are different in usage, with both shared and distinct collocates and themes.

The findings of the present study align with the previous study by Petcharat and Phoocharoensil (2017), who specifically investigated collocations and levels of formality. Their research revealed that while the synonyms share a core meaning, their collocational patterns and contextual appropriateness differ. In addition, the findings of the present study support the typology suggested by Schmitt (2010), who emphasized that collocational behavior reflects the semantic and pragmatic of synonyms. Furthermore, Aroonmanakun (2015) observed that corpus analysis shows such near-synonyms are not interchangeable in all contexts due to their differing collocational preferences and connotations. Both studies emphasize that understanding these differences through corpus data is essential for precise language use.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter summarizes the study and is divided into four sections: (1) a summary of the study, (2) a summary of the findings, (3) the conclusion (4) pedagogical implications, and (5) recommendations for future research.

5.1 Summary of the Study

5.1.1 Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this research was to investigate and compare the two English synonyms, *strong* and *powerful*, using a corpus. Specifically, the study aimed to examine their distribution within collocational frameworks and across levels of formality in various textual genres, with the goal of gaining insights into their situational functions.

5.1.2 Target Words, Materials, and Procedures

The two target words for the present study are the adjectives *strong* and *powerful*. The search was conducted on the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) with a selection of eight genres from spoken to academic, through newspapers and fiction. The analysis employed concordance, frequency count, and Mutual Information (MI) methods to analyze what the target words typically co-occurred with, and how formal (or not) they were.

5.2 Summary of the Findings

5.2.1 Degree of Formality

The data clearly demonstrate that *strong* is more frequently used across various genres, particularly in formal contexts such as academic texts and newspapers, where it appears significantly more often per million words (e.g., 192.87 vs. 96.31). This higher frequency in formal genres suggests that *strong* is more acceptable and appropriate in formal settings, making it the more formal of the two adjectives in general usage.

Conversely, *powerful* is used less frequently across these genres and is more often associated with informal contexts, such as magazines or spoken language, indicating a lower degree of formality overall. Therefore, based on the corpus data, *strong* has a higher degree of formality and is more versatile across registers, while *powerful* tends to be more informal or semi-formal, which accounts for its lower overall frequency in formal contexts.

5.2.2 Collocations

The findings show that although both *strong* and *powerful* share some common collocates, such as *influence* and *emotion*, they exhibit distinct primary collocational patterns. Specifically, *strong* is primarily associated with nouns like *support*, *tie*, and *connection* that are connected with the themes of Support and Relationship. In contrast, *powerful* predominantly collocates with nouns belonging to theme of Equipment. In addition, it collocates with nouns in the themes of Weapon and Force, Influence, Natural Phenomena, and Supernatural, such as *force*, *weapon*, *storm*, *influence* and *symbol*, which are linked to concepts of impact, control, and natural or supernatural phenomena. These differences in collocational preferences reflect their typical contextual uses: *strong* tends to focus on relationships, while *powerful* aligns more with influence, force, and impact.

5.3 Conclusion

Corpus data indicates that *strong* exhibits a higher level of formality and greater versatility across different registers, whereas *powerful* is generally used in more informal or semi-formal contexts, explaining its lower frequency in formal usage. In addition, the two adjectives exhibit both unique and shared noun collocates, as well as themes associated with the collocates.

The degree of formality and collocational patterns indicate that *strong* and *powerful* are loose (near) synonyms. They are not fully interchangeable, as their usage depends on context, and the specific semantic associations of their collocates.

This distinction underscores the importance of understanding the contextual and register-specific when choosing between these two synonyms.

5.4 Implications

The result of the study identifies the significant implication for language teaching, especially in using the synonym *strong* and *powerful*. As mentioned in Chapter 2, synonyms are complex and different connotations, and contextual usage (Hornby, 2010; Taylor, 2002). Moreover, it is challenging for learners to distinguish these differences, they are important for correct and contextually appropriate language use (Webb, 2007; Lee & Liu, 2009).

In light of these insights, teaching approaches should move beyond traditional dictionary learning which often gives synonyms as simple substitute words without providing the context-specific situation. Instead, corpus-based exercise should be integrated. It should allow students to engage with real language data and analyze how *strong* and *powerful* it is using across different genres and contexts. As emphasized in this study, using corpora such as COCA provides learners with the opportunity to word collocations and compare the word frequency. Therefore providing clearer insights into when, where and how to use these adjectives.

Furthermore, the collocational tendencies word pairing identified in this study where *strong* often relates to physical characteristics and relationship, while *powerful* is used with influence and authority should be taught. This theoretical approach suggests that synonyms are not only similar in dictionary definitions; it also requires the pragmatic and stylistic roles of words in various contexts (Hornby, 2010; Taylor, 2002; Aroonmanakun, 2015).

English Language Teachers (ELTs) can combine task-based learning activities that analyze real words and texts or corpora to identify noun collocates and observe usage in various genres. These activities help learners to select synonyms in accordance with specific genres. Additionally, increasing learners's awareness of using words in different situations such as formal vs informal, or written vs spoken. This can enhance their pragmatic sensitivity and prevent the error of using synonyms

One of the challenges in using synonyms in context is learners may face using synonyms in different contexts. Teachers should engage in constructive analysis and provide the opportunity to practice the words in context (Lee & Liu, 2009). This

approach will not only improve learners's words selections but also engage their confidence in using both writing and spoken language

To sum up, corpus-based pedagogical approaches can emphasize authentic usage of collocation patterns and specific genres. These approaches can increase learners' vocabulary and gain more accuracy and idiomatic language use which emphasize the importance of context, word-matching, and stylistic diversity in effectively learning and teaching synonyms.

5.5 Recommendations

Although this study focuses on the collocation patterns and degrees of formality of strong and powerful, future study can continue an in depth analysis of their grammatical patterns and the idioms. By investigating how these two adjectives can function with various sentences with different grammatical pattern can provide more understanding of their usage.

To investigate the finding of noun collocates and degree of formality, COCA is used. Future studies can explore British, Australian or other English corpus. It will offer insight into the usage of strong and powerful.

The current investigation limited the examination of collocate lists to the top-ranked 20 nouns associated with each adjective. Future research could expand this scope by investigating collocates of lower frequency to reveal more subtle and diverse patterns of usage, especially in specialized contexts.

Additionally, future studies can explore the pragmatic and contextual connotations of strong and powerful through qualitative approaches, such as discourse analysis or native speaker interviews, to deeply understanding of how these words are employed in real-life communication

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