# How to tell 'right' from 'wrong'

BRIAN POOLE

Native-speaker-like production is not the whole story

> 'After all,' said the Duchess vaguely, 'there are certain things you can't get away from. Right and wrong, good conduct and moral rectitude, have certain well-defined limits.'
>
> – 'Reginald at the Theatre', by H.H. Munro ('Saki')

In British English texts, the frequency profiles of the collocation of *right* and *wrong* with preceding adverbs show patterns which are almost symmetrically opposed. This general truth obtains despite the fact that there are adverbs – such as *completely* or *absolutely* – which logic, or the intuitions of a learner of English as a second or foreign language, might suggest should combine equally happily or frequently with either.

The data in the accompanying panel was obtained through the 'Simple Search of the British National Corpus' facility (see references). It is not claimed that the eleven adverbs chosen are in any way a representative sample of the adverb collocates of *right* and *wrong*.

It is not surprising that pejorative adverbs such as *terribly* or *dreadfully* should collocate with *wrong* only. However adverbs such as *completely* and *absolutely* which appear to be less value-laden also show markedly different distributions. In general the frequency with which the given adverbs collocate with *right* and *wrong* shows a sharp divide, with the first seven adverbs combining frequently with *wrong* and rarely or not at all with *right* and the final four lexical items doing the reverse.

As Hoey (2002) has demonstrated, in a condensed entry it is extremely difficult for lexicographers to provide language learners with all the information which they might conceivably need. He used the example of nouns such as *consequence* which show contrasting collocational patterns when singular and plural forms are compared. For example the plural form *consequences* has a much greater tendency than the singular form *consequence* to collocate with semantically negative adjectives such as *appalling* or *disastrous*.

| Adverb | Number of times directly preceding 'right' | Number of times directly preceding 'wrong' |
|---|---|---|
| Completely | 12 | 63 |
| Totally | 4 | 70 |
| Utterly | 0 | 9 |
| Terribly | 0 | 21 |
| Wholly | 4 | 12 |
| Dreadfully | 0 | 6 |
| Wildly | 0 | 4 |
| Absolutely | 256 | 14 |
| Just | 255 | 10 |
| Partly | 16 | 0 |
| half[1] | 26 | 3 |

[1]Note that *Collins Dictionary of the English Language* (1979, pp. 661–2) lists *half right* and *half wrong* as compound adjectives.

For learners of English as a second or foreign language who want to develop native-like control of lexical combination in written and spoken production, it seems that dictionaries can only provide a starting-point. Exposure to large – very large! – amounts of native-speaker output might lead gradually to this goal, but

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perhaps regular teacher-guided work with corpora such as the British National Corpus could accelerate the process.

Alternatively, many might argue that second or foreign language learners should not be led to regard native-speaker-like production as a wholly attainable or desirable goal. In this view a command of the target language that is communicatively effective, though occasionally recognizably non-native, is the ultimate achievement. Yet when English has become the world's lingua franca it seems reasonable to ask where clear-cut findings about the behaviour of individual lexical items (such as *right* and *wrong* above) will be recorded and made available to language learners and researchers. If it is impracticable to include this level of detail in dictionaries then one is drawn to the conclusion that all language teachers (and learners at higher levels of competence) should be trained to exploit the vast potential of computer corpora (of English or of any other language). For the learner, instincts about lexical combination are perhaps most easily developed this way. ■

### *References*


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