

Genre Distribution and Collocational Usage of Primary, Main, and Major

Supakorn Phoocharoensil

Thammasat University, Thailand

Abstract:

English is well-known for its abundance of near-synonyms—words with similar meanings—which often pose challenges for learners when determining their appropriate use in various contexts. This corpus-based study seeks to distinguish the synonyms primary, main, and major by examining their genre distribution and collocational patterns. The synonyms were chosen due to their frequency and relevance: main and major rank among the top 1,000 words in spoken and written English (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2014), while primary is part of Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List (AWL). Data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) reveal that these adjectives most frequently appear in academic texts, with primary also being prominent in newspapers and magazines. Collocation analysis based on frequency and MI scores highlights shared associations, such as all three adjectives collocating with concern. However, specific pairs and unique combinations also emerge, e.g., primary/main focus, main/major theme, and primary/major factor. Moreover, distinct semantic themes are linked to each synonym: primary with health and elections, main with locations, food, or literature, and major with sports or business. For English language teaching (ELT), it is recommended that teachers design synonym-focused lessons using typical collocates informed by authentic, corpus-based resources like COCA.