Chapter 4 – Checking Colligations and Collocations

4.1 When you investigate “window collocations” you study which words occur close to the keyword. Investigate which verbs occur frequently with the word city in COCA.

(i) Log in to COCA. In the search panel, click the “List” button, set the “SORT” option on “Frequency” and type in the search word city. Under “POS LIST” (short for part-of speech-list), scroll down to “verb.ALL” and choose this. Now [v*] will appear in the context field. Under CONTEXT, change the window size to −5 +5. Then press “Search”. Study the first thirty verbs. What kind of verbs are they?

(ii) Repeat the procedure in (i), but set the “SORT” option on “Relevance”. This will give you a list based on mutual information. Compare the verbs you find here with those you found in (i).

(iii) Investigate a few more words from different word classes in the same manner. Try using different size windows and different spans to the left and to the right and see what changes.

4.2 You can investigate adjacent collocations in COCA by using the same method as in 4.1, but narrowing the window size. In this task, investigate what kind of revolutions people speak and write about in COCA.

(i) Log in to COCA. In the search panel, click the “List” button, set the “SORT” option on “Frequency” and type in the search word revolution. Under “POS LIST”, scroll down to “adj.ALL” and choose this. Now [adj*] will appear in the context field. Under CONTEXT, change the window size to −1 +0 to retrieve only the adjectives that occur immediately before revolution. Then press “Search”. Study the first thirty collocates. What kind of adjectives are they? Do they predominantly say where the revolution took place, what was revolutionised or in what manner the revolution was carried out?

(ii) Repeat the procedure in (i), but choose noun.ALL+ under “POS LIST” to get all nouns that collocate with revolution in the −1 slot. Study the first thirty collocates. What kind of nouns are they? (In fact, you may wonder whether some of these words are nouns at all – some of them, like Republican, can be either nouns or adjectives and may be wrongly tagged as nouns in these examples.)

(iii) Repeat the procedure in (ii), but under “SORT” choose “Relevance”. Note that now some collocations with a low total frequency come higher on the list. Compare the two lists. Which do you find more interesting?
4.3 Colligations describe the grammatical categories that a word frequently occurs with. In order to study colligations we will use William Fletcher’s database Phrases in English (PIE), which is based on the BNC.

(i) Go to http://pie.usna.edu/. Read through the information about the database on the first page. Then go to “Grams” at the very top of the page and choose “N-Grams Simple”.

(ii) In the search box, type in the word help. Then go down to “POS Codes” (short for part-of-speech codes) and at “choose POS code” scroll down to “verbs: all” and choose that. Then click on “Insert POS code”. The search box should now contain this: help{V*}.

(iii) In order to see which three words frequently come after the verb help, add three + signs in the search box, which should now look like this: help{V*} + + +. Then go down to “Minimum frequency” and change the setting to 10.

(iv) Click on “Search”. You will now get a list with the most frequent 4-grams beginning with the verb help. For each 4-gram, the POS tags are given to the right. An explanation of the POS tags can be had by positioning the cursor over the tags. Go through all the examples and see how many different grammatical constructions you can find, i.e. is the verb followed by a (pro)noun, a to-infinitive etc.?