# Linguistics (Lecture 03)

## *Firthian Linguistics*

**Dr Djalal Mansour**

**Thursday, October 11th, 2018**

# Firth Biography

- John Rupert Firth was born in 1890. After serving as Professor of English at the University of the Punjab from 1919 to 1928, he took up a post in the phonetics department of University College, London. In 1938 he moved to the linguistics department of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, where from 1944 until his retirement in 1956 he was Professor of General Linguistics.

# Firth Biography

- He died in 1960. He was an influential teacher, some of whose doctrines (especially those concerning phonology) were widely propagated and developed by his students in what came to be known as as the "London school" of linguistics.

# Quotes on Firthian Role

- *If we regard Robins as the 'father of the History of Linguistics in Britain' today, we should perhaps call Firth the grandfather of this field of human curiosity about language and the manner in which it has been treated and used in the past 2,500 years. (Koerner 2004:202)*

# The Business of Linguistics According To Firth

"The business of linguistics", according to Firth, "is to describe languages".1) In saying as ·such he would have the assent of most twentieth-century linguistic theorists. Where he parts company with many is in holding that this enterprise is not incompatible with, or *even* separable from, studying "the living voice of a man in action"; and his chief interest as a linguistic thinker lies in hIS 3~lemVl to resist the idea that synchronic descriptive linguistics should treat what he calls "speech-events" as no more than a means of access to what really interests the linguist: the language-system underlying them.

# Collocation

# Frequency of Collocational Patterns

**Altenberg (1991: 128) sates that**,

 "roughly 70% of the running words in the corpus form part of recurrent word combinations of some kind."

# Firth 1957

The investigation of such word combinations in corpora of authentic language dates back to the earliest studies of collocations by J. R. Firth (1957), who is commonly credited with introducing the concept within British Contextualism.

# Computers and the Feasibility of Collocation Studies

Serious corpus-based exploration of collocations on a larger scale has only become feasible with the arrival of the computer in the linguist's workspace in the late 20th century. Since then, a substantial number of corpora of different sizes have become available, opening up new possibilities for collocation studies and many other linguistic applications. Progress has been made in particular by harnessing ever larger corpora, a growing range of statistical measures of association (cf. Evert 2004),and state-of-the-art software tools for automatic linguistic annotation and analysis.

# What is Collocation

Collocation refers to the syntagmatic attraction between two (or more) lexical items: morphemes, words, phrases or utterances. Most often, however, collocation analyses have been conducted on the word-level). The concept of collocation is based on the notion that each word in a language prefers certain lexical contexts over others, i.e. that any given word tends to co-occur with certain wordsmore often than it does with others. For example, the word *grass* is often used together with *green*, and the lexeme LETTER is often used together with the lexemes WRITE AND READ (see e.g. Kjellmer 1996: 83). The strength of this kind of attraction between words can be measured through the statistical analysis of corpus data. The purpose of these statistical calculations is to find word pairs with significantly more co-occurrences than what would be expected by chance, given the words' total frequencies in the data. Thus, we can establish the most significant *collocates* of any given word in the language variety that the data represents

# Collocation Strength

- The syntagmatic attraction, or *collocation strength,* between two words W1 and W2 (a *node* and its *collocate*) is calculated based on four observed absolute frequencies in the data:

➢ (i) the total number of word tokens in the corpus,

➢ (ii) the number of tokens of W1 in the corpus, (

➢ iii) the number of tokens of W2 in the corpus, and

➢ (iv) the number of tokens where W1 and W2 co-occur within a specified distance from each other.

# Collocational Analysis

Collocation analysis is one of the most extensively used methods in corpus linguistics today. It has a fundamental place in the research on contextual semantics, i.e. the description of meaning of lexical items based on their contextual distribution in naturally occurring language. Contextual meaning has sometimes also been re-ferred to as *collocational meaning* (Leech 1974, Partington 1998). In particular, collocation analysis has been used extensively to compare the meaning of near-synonyms. It has been demonstrated that near-synonymous words often differ as to the lexical contexts they prefer; for example, the adjectives *powerful* and *strong* have a differing set of significant collocates: *a powerful car, ?a strong car, ?powerful tea, strong tea.*

# Collocational Analysis

Similar comparisons have been made for, among others, *handsome – pretty* (Palmer 1976: 96, Leech 1974: 20), *between – through* (Kennedy 1991), *absolutely – completely – entirely* (Partington 1998), *big – large – great* (Biber, Conrad and Reppen 1998), *almost – nearly* (Kjellmer 2003) and *high – tall* (Taylor 2003). Gries (2001, 2003) has compared the collocates for the English adjective pairs ending in *-ic/-ical* (e.g. *alphabetic – alphabetical*), i.e. for adjectives with differing derivational suffixes.