

The Problem of Semantic Overlap and Distinction in English Verbs: A Corpus-Based Study of English Synonyms “AMUSE,” “ENTERTAIN,” and “DIVERT”

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ABSTRACT

Distinguishing between the near-synonyms *amuse*, *entertain*, and *divert* remains a challenge for EFL learners due to nuanced semantic and distributional overlaps. Using the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), this study analyzed the lemmas of these verbs within a [4L, 4R] collocation window ($MI \geq 3.0$) to identify the top 30 noun collocates across eight genres. Frequency data reveal that *entertains* is the most versatile, occurring broadly in news and web genres, whereas *amuse* is restricted primarily to narrative contexts in fiction and spoken texts. In contrast, *divert* predominates in formal and academic domains, specifically relating to the redirection of attention or resources. Collocational patterns suggest that *amuse* strongly associates with human emotional reactions, *entertain* with social roles and abstract ideas, and *divert* with technical or administrative concepts. These corpus-derived patterns provide essential linguistic evidence for enhancing lexical precision in vocabulary instruction, though further empirical study is required to evaluate their direct impact on learning outcomes.

Keywords: Synonyms, Corpus linguistics, Corpus-based study, Collocation, COCA

Introduction

Language is a complex system in which words often appear synonymous yet differ subtly in meaning, usage, and context. These nuances, central to lexical semantics, are especially challenging for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, who must not only know word meanings but also understand their appropriate usage in real-world contexts (Cruse, 1986; Nation, 2001). A critical issue arose during the teaching of “English for Standardized Tests” course for first-year undergraduates, where students struggled to differentiate between the verbs *amuse*, *entertain*, and *divert*. Despite being listed as synonyms in dictionaries, learners were unsure when and how to use each verb appropriately in context-based exercises. Dictionary definitions and

translation-based instruction failed to clarify the subtle semantic and pragmatic differences among these verbs, leading to persistent confusion and misuse.

The selection of *amuse*, *entertain*, and *divert* is motivated by their status as near-synonyms that often pose a significant challenge for English learners. Although these verbs share a core meaning related to providing enjoyment, they are not always interchangeable in natural discourse. Our observations indicate that even advanced learners frequently struggle to distinguish between them, often resulting in word choices that lack contextual precision. This suggests a clear gap in existing instructional materials, which often fail to address the subtle differences in how these verbs function. Consequently, this study employs a corpus-based analysis to uncover the specific collocational and genre-related patterns of each verb, providing the empirical evidence needed to improve learners' lexical accuracy.

To address this issue, the present study adopts a corpus-based approach, utilizing the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) to investigate the frequency, distribution, and semantic behavior of *amuse*, *entertain*, and *divert*. Corpus linguistics provides an empirical framework for analyzing how words behave in authentic contexts (Biber et al., 1998; Sinclair, 1991). Prior studies, such as Khlakheang (2025), have demonstrated how corpus methods illuminate subtle distinctions between near-synonyms like *show* and *display*, which are often obscured in traditional lexicographic resources. Similarly, this study aims to reveal how each verb in question occupies a distinct semantic domain and collocational space, offering insights relevant to both applied linguistics and EFL pedagogy.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the frequency variations and distributional patterns of the English verb synonyms *amuse*, *entertain*, and *divert* across various genres in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA).
2. To investigate the semantic and collocational similarities and differences among *amuse*, *entertain*, and *divert* by examining their top noun collocates and contextual usage based on COCA data.

Literature Review

The Definitions of Synonyms

Synonymy in linguistics refers to the semantic similarity between words, though perfect interchangeability is rare. Crystal (2018) notes that while synonyms share core meanings, they often differ in nuance, register, or usage constraints. Cruse (2000) distinguishes between *absolute synonyms*—lexical pairs that are fully interchangeable in all contexts, which are exceptionally rare—and *near-synonyms*, which exhibit significant semantic overlap but differ in tone, collocation, or contextual appropriateness.

Jackson and Amvela (2000) similarly emphasize that near-synonyms may not be substitutable across all situations due to differences in connotation or usage patterns. Murphy (2010) further stresses the role of context and collocation in shaping meaning, arguing that synonymy should be assessed not just lexically but also functionally. These views support the growing use of corpus-based research, which offers empirical insights into how synonyms behave in authentic discourse.

Corpus Linguistics and Word Studies

Corpus linguistics provides a systematic approach to studying language as it is used in real-world contexts, allowing researchers to uncover patterns of lexical behavior across genres and registers (Crawford & Csomay, 2016; Szudarski, 2018). By analyzing word associations and collocational tendencies, corpora reveal semantic nuances and contextual usage that traditional dictionaries often overlook. As Moon (2010) emphasizes, understanding words within their typical environments enhances both theoretical insights and practical applications in language teaching and learning.

Collocations

Collocations—habitual combinations of words that frequently co-occur—are essential for achieving fluency and idiomatic accuracy in language use. O'Dell and McCarthy (2017, p. 6) define a collocation as “a combination of two or more words which frequently occur together,” highlighting the predictable nature of word partnerships in authentic discourse. According to Sinclair (1991), such regular patterns are governed by the *idiom principle*, whereby speakers rely on pre-constructed multi-word units rather than generating each phrase anew.

Moon (2010) emphasizes that collocational knowledge reflects both linguistic norms and pragmatic appropriateness, influencing how learners interpret and produce meaning in context. Likewise, Nation (2001) stresses the pedagogical value of collocations in vocabulary acquisition, arguing that learners who internalize frequent word combinations are better equipped to use language naturally and fluently.

Developing collocational competence allows learners to avoid awkward or non-native-like constructions (e.g., *yellow hair*) in favor of more accepted expressions (e.g., *blond hair*). As such, understanding and practicing collocations is a vital component of lexical proficiency in EFL contexts.

Previous Studies

Recent corpus-based studies have significantly advanced our understanding of synonymy by examining how near-synonyms differ in usage, frequency, and collocational behavior—elements often absent from traditional dictionary-based instruction. Among these, the works of Cherngroongroj (2023), as well as those of Khlakheang and Cherngroongroj (2024), stand out for their comprehensive scope and pedagogical focus.

Cherngroongroj (2023) investigated the verbs *show* and *display*, uncovering distinct usage patterns across genres using COCA. The study revealed that while both verbs share core meanings,

show was significantly more frequent and functioned in broader communicative contexts (e.g., *arriving at a place*), whereas *display* was more restricted to technical and visual domains (e.g., *computer* or *screen* contexts). This analysis underscored the limitations of dictionary definitions and demonstrated how genre and contextual preferences shape synonym usage.

Building upon this foundation, Khlakheang and Cherngroongroj (2024) conducted a genre-sensitive corpus study of the verbs *decline*, *decrease*, and *reduce*. They found that *decline* and *decrease* were primarily used in academic texts, while *reduce* appeared across a broader range of genres, including environmental and financial discourse. Their findings highlighted the pedagogical importance of teaching genre-specific usage and collocational preferences to support EFL learners' lexical competence.

More recent studies, Khlakheang (2025) have utilized large-scale corpora like COCA to demonstrate that synonyms like "GAZE" and "GLARE" carry distinct affective loads—one often being neutral or positive, while the other is predominantly negative. However, despite these contributions, there remains a pedagogical gap in analyzing the specific triad of "GAZE", "GLARE", and "GLIMPSE" within a unified corpus framework. This study aims to fill that gap by providing a data-driven distinction based on real-world usage patterns.

Earlier research also supports the value of corpus-based approaches. Phoocharoensil (2010) examined the formal and collocational distinctions among five synonymous verbs related to requesting, while Chung (2011) contrasted *create* and *produce* in terms of distributional patterns. Other scholars (e.g., Thamratana, 2013; Jarunwaraphan & Mallikamas, 2020) combined corpus analysis with dictionary data to show how context shapes synonym selection.

However, many of these studies focus on limited variables or specific semantic fields, and few have investigated near-synonyms like *amuse*, *entertain*, and *divert*, which pose unique challenges in both meaning and register. To address this gap, the present study adopts an integrative approach—analyzing frequency, genre distribution, and collocational behavior using COCA—to offer a more comprehensive understanding of these verbs. In doing so, it builds on and extends the contributions of Khlakheang and Cherngroongroj (2024) by applying similar methods to a new lexical set with pedagogical relevance.

Methodology

This study adopted a corpus-based approach to examine the verbs *amuse*, *entertain*, and *divert*, drawing on COCA, the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2014), and the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2020). Following frameworks by Lindquist (2009), Cherngroongroj (2023), together with Khlakheang and Cherngroongroj (2024), the analysis proceeded in five steps: (1) examining frequency and genre distribution in COCA; (2) establishing semantic baselines through dictionary definitions; (3) extracting the top 30 noun collocates for each verb using MI scores ≥ 3 (Cheng, 2012); (4) categorizing collocates by lexical field to identify semantic preferences; and (5)

interpreting comparative usage patterns. This methodology offers a comprehensive view of synonym behavior in authentic contexts, informing both lexical semantics and EFL instruction.

Results

This section presents the findings from the corpus-based analysis of the three English verb synonyms *amuse*, *entertain*, and *divert*. The results are organized into two main parts: (1) frequency and distributional patterns across genres, and (2) collocational profiles based on noun collocates extracted from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). By examining both frequency and collocational data, the study aims to identify the semantic nuances and contextual preferences of each verb that may not be captured through dictionary definitions alone.

1. Frequency and Genre Distribution

Table 1 reports the raw and per-million frequencies of each verb across eight COCA genres, revealing clear differences in their real-world distribution.

Table 1 Distribution patterns of “*amuse*,” “*entertain*,” and “*divert*” across eight genres in COCA

Genre	<i>Amuse</i>		<i>Entertain</i>		<i>Divert</i>	
	Frequency	Per million	Frequency	Per million	Frequency	Per million
Blog	132	1.03	838	6.52	413	3.21
Web	177	1.42	848	6.82	401	3.23
TV / Movies	207	1.62	674	5.26	273	2.13
Spoken	64	0.51	546	4.33	324	2.57
Fiction	313	2.65	671	5.67	298	2.52
Magazine	152	1.21	832	6.6	404	3.2
News	129	1.06	886	7.28	476	3.91
Academic	76	0.63	504	4.21	475	3.97
Total	1,250		5,799		3,064	

Table 1 shows the frequency and normalized rates (PMW) of *amuse*, *entertain*, and *divert* across eight COCA genres. *Entertain* is the most frequent verb (5,799 tokens), with high PMW in News (7.28), Web (6.82), and Magazine (6.60), reflecting its broad usage in media and informative genres. *Amuse* is the least frequent (1,250 tokens), peaking in Fiction (2.65 PMW) and TV/Movies (1.62 PMW), suggesting its preference for narrative and emotive contexts. *Divert* (3,064 tokens) shows higher relative frequencies in Academic (3.97 PMW) and News (3.91 PMW), aligning with its use in formal and technical discourse.

Meanings

The frequency and distributional patterns in Table 1 reveal clear semantic distinctions among *amuse*, *entertain*, and *divert*. While traditionally viewed as near-synonyms, these verbs exhibit unique contextual behaviors. *Amuse* is strongly associated with narrative and emotive genres like Fiction and TV/Movies, suggesting an affective and interpersonal function centered on humor and light enjoyment (Sinclair, 1991; Cruse, 1986). In contrast, *entertain* appears across both narrative and expository genres, indicating broader semantic scope—it conveys not only emotional engagement but also cognitive functions, such as “entertaining an idea” (Murphy, 2010; Biber et al., 1998). *Divert*, meanwhile, dominates in formal genres such as News and Academic writing, where it often refers to the redirection of abstract or concrete entities (e.g., attention, resources), aligning with more technical or figurative senses.

2. Collocational patterns

To deepen this analysis, the study examined the top 30 noun collocates of each verb using Mutual Information (MI) scores from COCA. As per Sinclair’s (1991) idiom principle, recurrent collocational patterns help define a word’s functional meaning. Table 2 summarizes these collocates, offering corpus-based insights into how each verb operates in authentic discourse and reinforcing their semantic divergence.

Table 2 Noun Collocates with “*Amuse*,” “*Entertain*,” and “*Divert*”

No.	Amuse			Entertain			Divert		
	Collocate	Freq.	MI Score	Collocate	Freq.	MI Score	Collocate	Freq.	MI Score
1	Children	25	3.37	Idea	168	4.34	Attention	672	8.3
2	Bouche	18	14.48	Guests	130	7.38	Water	140	5.06
3	Friends	14	3.47	Friends	104	4.01	Resources	150	6.83
4	Ways	13	3.95	Possibility	107	6.18	Money	108	4.09
5	Expense	8	6.3	Notion	96	6.49	Power	72	4.13
6	Clown	6	7.26	Kids	69	3.42	Funds	64	6.39
7	Toys	6	6.03	Audience	72	5.21	Attempt	45	5.66
8	Guests	7	5.05	Thoughts	60	5.22	Energy	39	4.04
9	Ment	4	9.67	Troops	45	5.07	River	33	4.79
10	Tourists	4	5.82	Ideas	48	4.18	Flow	30	5.84
11	Fans	4	3.53	Lettuce	35	8.17	Traffic	27	5.28
12	Talent	4	4.29	Audiences	39	6.62	Plan	26	3.29
13	Spectators	3	7.1	Tale	30	5.9	Dollars	26	4.39
14	Tales	3	5.52	Visitors	34	5.41	Effort	27	4.15
15	Sons	3	4.42	Clients	32	4.92	Programs	21	3.64

Table 2 Noun Collocates with “Amuse,” “Entertain,” and “Divert” (Cont.)

No.	Amuse			Entertain			Divert		
	Collocate	Freq.	MI Score	Collocate	Freq.	MI Score	Collocate	Freq.	MI Score
16	Humans	3	3.69	Fans	35	4.17	Suspicion	15	6.66
17	Readers	4	3.55	Crowd	31	4.42	Thoughts	14	4.26
18	Master	3	3.36	Imaginations	28	9.31	Conversation	18	3.77
19	Pictures	3	3.21	Ability	31	3.17	Workers	14	3.24
20	Audience	4	3.1	Stories	26	3.03	Path	15	4.01
21	Liberals	4	4.86	Doubts	21	6.18	Focus	14	3.03
22	Tale	3	4.53	Offers	21	3.76	Funding	16	4.32
23	Reader	3	3.75	Customers	20	3.73	Waste	15	4.14
24	Surprise	3	3.04	Notions	20	6.45	Ability	12	3.06
25	Victorine	2	12.33	Guest	18	4.28	Discussion	14	3.49
26	Hearers	2	10.0	Readers	20	3.61	Plans	11	3.14
27	Curiosities	3	9.31	Fantasies	17	6.62	Energies	11	7.48
28	Fester	2	8.36	Reader	14	3.91	Waters	11	4.93
29	Entertainers	2	7.93	Masses	16	5.47	Dams	10	7.8
30	Companions	2	6.24	Ladies	14	3.78	Materials	10	3.87

The collocational profiles in Table 2 reveal clear semantic distinctions among *amuse*, *entertain*, and *divert*, challenging the notion that these verbs are fully synonymous. While *amuse* typically co-occurs with human and emotion-related nouns (e.g., *children*, *laughter*, *delight*), reinforcing its affective and interpersonal usage, *entertain* combines both social (*guests*, *audience*) and cognitive collocates (*idea*, *notion*), reflecting its broader, polysemous nature (Murphy, 2010). In contrast, *divert* is primarily associated with abstract or procedural nouns (*attention*, *resources*, *traffic*), indicating use in formal or technical contexts. These patterns illustrate Cruse’s (1986) concept of contextual restriction and Sinclair’s (1991) idiom principle, whereby collocations shape and signal meaning. The minimal overlap among collocates—except for a few shared terms like *audience*—underscores the verbs’ functional non-interchangeability. As Stubbs (2001) suggests, collocational behavior serves as a reliable indicator of semantic divergence in real-world usage.

Table 3 The semantic preferences of nouns that collocate with *amuse*

No.	Semantic preference	Noun collocates of <i>amuse</i>
1	EMOTION / REACTION	pleasure, delight, laughter, laugh, chuckle, grin, smile, joy
2	HUMAN	people, man, woman, boy, girl, children, audience, crowd, guests, friends
3	PSYCHOLOGICAL STATES	mind, senses, curiosity, imagination, attention
4	ACTIONS / EVENTS	trick, joke, game, stunt, performance, incident, scene, gesture
5	ABSTRACT / OTHER	attempt, thing, story, comment, result

Table 4 The semantic preferences of nouns that collocate with *entertain*

No.	Semantic preference	Noun collocates of <i>entertain</i>
1	HUMAN	guests, audience, public, crowd, visitors, children, friends
2	COGNITIVE CONTENT	idea, notion, possibility, thought, doubt, belief, view, perspective
3	ACTIVITY / PERFORMANCE	show, program, performance, event, ceremony, party
4	EMOTION / REACTION	pleasure, amusement, interest, delight, enjoyment
5	ABSTRACT / OTHER	subject, theme, thing, topic, response

Table 5 The semantic preferences of nouns that collocate with *divert*

No.	Semantic preference	Noun collocates of <i>divert</i>
1	RESOURCE / MATERIAL	funds, money, resources, capital, water, energy
2	ATTENTION / COGNITIVE FOCUS	attention, focus, interest, effort, thought
3	TRAFFIC / MOVEMENT	traffic, vehicles, flow, route, stream, lane
4	STRATEGIC / ADMINISTRATIVE CONTROL	aid, support, budget, spending, investment, income
5	ABSTRACT / OTHER	process, activity, measure, pressure, action

The semantic preferences observed through the noun collocates of *amuse*, *entertain*, and *divert* provide compelling evidence of their functional divergence. While often grouped as

synonyms, corpus-based patterns reveal distinct contextual alignments. *Amuse* is closely tied to affective and interpersonal contexts, with collocates such as *children*, *laughter*, and *delight*, indicating a usage centered on emotional engagement and light-hearted entertainment—typically found in informal genres like fiction or spoken discourse. In contrast, *entertain* displays broader polysemy, combining social (e.g., *audience*, *guests*) and cognitive (e.g., *idea*, *possibility*) collocates. This range reflects its flexible application in both performative and conceptual domains, consistent with Murphy’s (2010) view of high-frequency verbs supporting multiple senses via collocational variation.

Divert, however, emerges as functionally distinct, co-occurring with nouns like *attention*, *resources*, *funds*, and *traffic*, suggesting a procedural and often formal use related to redirection or allocation. Its presence in academic and institutional registers reinforces its alignment with technical and strategic discourse. These minimal overlaps in collocational patterns support Sinclair’s (1991) idiom principle and Stubbs’ (2001) notion of meaning-in-use, illustrating that meaning is constructed through habitual associations rather than dictionary equivalence. Ultimately, the data fulfill the second research objective by demonstrating that synonymy is best understood through contextualized corpus evidence—offering important implications for vocabulary instruction and lexical analysis.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated the frequency, distributional tendencies, and semantic behavior of the English verb synonyms *amuse*, *entertain*, and *divert* through a corpus-based analysis using COCA. By integrating quantitative frequency data with qualitative collocational profiling, the research uncovered how these verbs—though often treated as interchangeable—exhibit distinct usage patterns shaped by genre, register, and semantic domain.

The findings revealed clear distributional divergence. *Entertain* emerged as the most frequent and genre-flexible verb, suggesting broad pragmatic applicability across both informative and narrative contexts. *Amuse*, in contrast, was markedly restricted to informal, affective settings, primarily fiction and spoken-like genres, indicating its close alignment with emotional and interpersonal communication. *Divert* showed strong associations with formal and technical genres such as academic and news texts, reflecting its usage in procedural, institutional, or cognitive redirection.

Collocational analysis further deepened these distinctions. *Amuse* predominantly co-occurred with human and emotional nouns, reinforcing its light-hearted and reactive connotation. *Entertain* exhibited polysemy, interacting with both social and abstract nouns, pointing to its dual function in performance and idea processing. *Divert* showed stable collocational ties to abstract and technical concepts (e.g., *attention*, *resources*, *funds*), underscoring its pragmatic specificity in

formal discourse. These patterns affirm Sinclair’s (1991) idiom principle and Stubbs’ (2001) argument that meaning is revealed through usage—not definition alone.

Crucially, this research advances both theoretical and applied knowledge. Theoretically, it reinforces the utility of corpus linguistics for unpacking synonymy as a contextual phenomenon, rather than a binary lexical equivalence. Pedagogically, it offers empirical evidence to support the teaching of near-synonyms with attention to genre sensitivity and collocation awareness—addressing real challenges observed in EFL classrooms where learners often misapply words based on oversimplified definitions.

In sum, this study demonstrates that *amuse*, *entertain*, and *divert* are not merely lexical variants but contextually distinct verbs whose usage reflects deeper semantic preferences. Through corpus-based methods, language educators and material developers can better support learners in making accurate, nuanced lexical choices—bridging the gap between theoretical synonymy and practical language use.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study underscore the pedagogical necessity of moving beyond traditional dictionary-based instruction toward data-driven learning (DDL) frameworks for teaching near-synonyms. Specifically, the nuanced distinctions between *amuse*, *entertain*, and *divert* can be effectively integrated into the EFL curriculum through genre-based noticing tasks, where learners contrast the occurrences of these verbs in narrative fiction against their usage in formal academic discourse.

To strengthen collocational competence, instructors should implement sorting activities that require learners to categorize noun collocates according to their semantic roles—distinguishing, for instance, between human recipients associated with *amuse* and the technical or administrative redirection typical of *divert*. Furthermore, production-oriented tasks that focus on register appropriateness can help advanced learners refine their lexical choices by revising sentences to better suit specific communicative contexts.

Recognizing common classroom constraints such as limited instructional time and varying levels of corpus literacy, these activities may be most effectively delivered through scaffolded, paper-based materials featuring pre-selected concordance lines. Ultimately, while corpus data provides a robust guide to frequency and typicality, instructors should encourage learners to treat these patterns as probabilistic tendencies rather than absolute rules, using authentic examples to develop a more flexible and context-sensitive command of the language.

Recommendations for Further Studies

Future research could expand the current study by examining other sets of near-synonyms that pose challenges for EFL learners, incorporating learner corpora to analyze real usage patterns

and errors, or employing longitudinal methods to evaluate the effectiveness of corpus-based instruction. Cross-linguistic comparisons and studies on semantic prosody may also offer deeper insights into how meaning and usage are shaped by cultural and discourse-specific factors. These directions would enrich both theoretical understanding and pedagogical practice in vocabulary acquisition.

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