

The verb “to attend” and its different meanings
O verbo “to attend” e seus diferentes significados

Giuliana Marques

Michele Moraes

Resumo: *Este artigo é um estudo do verbo “to attend”, um dos 2.500 verbos mais frequentes em Inglês, conforme o Macmillan English Dictionary. Nós investigamos as frequências, os significados e colocações do verbo com ou sem a preposição “to”. O objetivo deste estudo é enfatizar a diferença de uso e frequência entre o verbo com ou sem a preposição, considerando seu uso na fala e escrita. Esta é uma pesquisa baseada nos pressupostos da linguística de corpus, através do Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), que traz amostras naturais do idioma em análise. Neste estudo, nós concluímos que nem todas as definições do verbo “to attend”, que constam no dicionário, são usadas com frequência em Inglês.*

Palavras-chave: *to attend, colocações, frequências, significados, COCA*

Abstract: *This paper is a study of the verb "to attend", which is one of the 2,500 most frequent English words according to Macmillan English Dictionary. We investigated the frequencies, the meanings and the collocations of this verb with and without the preposition "to". The objective of this study is to highlight the difference in use and frequency between the verb with or without preposition considering spoken and written language. This is a corpus based research, using the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), which we believe is not only a valuable resource for language research but also provides samples of natural use of language. In this study, we concluded that not all the different definitions of “to attend” are widely used in English.*

Key Words: *to attend; collocations; frequency, meanings, COCA*

1 Introduction

There are some verbs in English which can be used both with a particular preposition and without any preposition. However, when both forms convey different meanings, common errors may occur among ESL students. In this research we intend to study a specific verb under this pattern which is the verb “to attend – to attend to”. In the Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners (2007), a corpus-based dictionary, the verb “to attend” is among the 2,500 most frequent English words. In this project, we will investigate the different meanings of the verb “to attend” with and without the prepositions “to” and its correspondent collocations. Moreover, we will search for the frequencies in which this verb occurs in five sections: spoken,

fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, and academic, collected in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). This research is addressed to undergraduate and graduate students of the English language, or to teachers who are interested in perceiving subtleties of the English language as well as producing educational materials for students.

2 Methodology

Language corpora are a database of texts which can be used as a valuable resource for language research. According to Sarmiento (2011), a corpus is a collection of texts based on examples from real life and it allows researchers to generate empirical studies about a language.

For this research, we used the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). COCA is the largest freely-available corpus of English, and the only large and balanced corpus of American English. It was created by Mark Davies of Brigham Young University and is used by tens of thousands of users, such as linguists, teachers, translators, and ESL students.

The corpus contains more than 425 million words of text and is equally divided among five sections: spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, and academic texts. It includes 20 million words each year from 1990-2011 and is updated once or twice a year (the most recent texts are from March 2011). The corpus allowed us to limit searches by frequency and collocations using real-life language, thus, a reliable source for research. According to Keddie (One Stop English), identifying the most common words and items within texts is the most basic function of a corpus, as well as, conducting analytical studies including collocational analysis.

We first searched for the three sections in which “attend” was most frequent, i.e. newspaper, academic and magazine sections.

For each of these sections, in order to obtain the ten most frequent noun and adjective collocations that follow the verb “attend”, we searched the list display of COCA and we set only one word to the right and zero to the left, as shown in FIGURE 1. This way, we only obtained the first noun or adjective that appeared after the verb “attend”. In some tables, we obtained repeated nouns in the same section when both singular and plural forms of the same noun appeared. We put the verb “attend” between square brackets to get the verb “attend” in all possible verb forms in COCA, that is, *attend, attends, attending and attended*.

Figure 1



SEARCH STRING		?
WORD(S)	<input type="text" value="[attend]"/>	?
COLLOCATES	<input type="text" value="*"/> <input type="text" value="0"/> <input type="text" value="1"/>	?
POS LIST	<input type="text" value="-select-"/>	?
RANDOM	<input type="button" value="SEARCH"/> <input type="button" value="RESET"/>	?
SECTIONS <input type="checkbox"/> SHOW		?
1	<input type="text" value="IGNORE"/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ----- SPOKEN FICTION MAGAZINE NEWSPAPER ACADEMIC 	2
		<input type="text" value="IGNORE"/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ----- SPOKEN FICTION MAGAZINE NEWSPAPER ACADEMIC

In order to obtain the ten most frequent verb collocations that precede the verb “attend” in COCA, we searched the list mode and set two words to the left and zero to the right, as shown in Figure 2. Thus, we not only excluded any possible verbs that could occur to the left of “attend”, but we also obtained only verbs in the same sentence as “attend”.

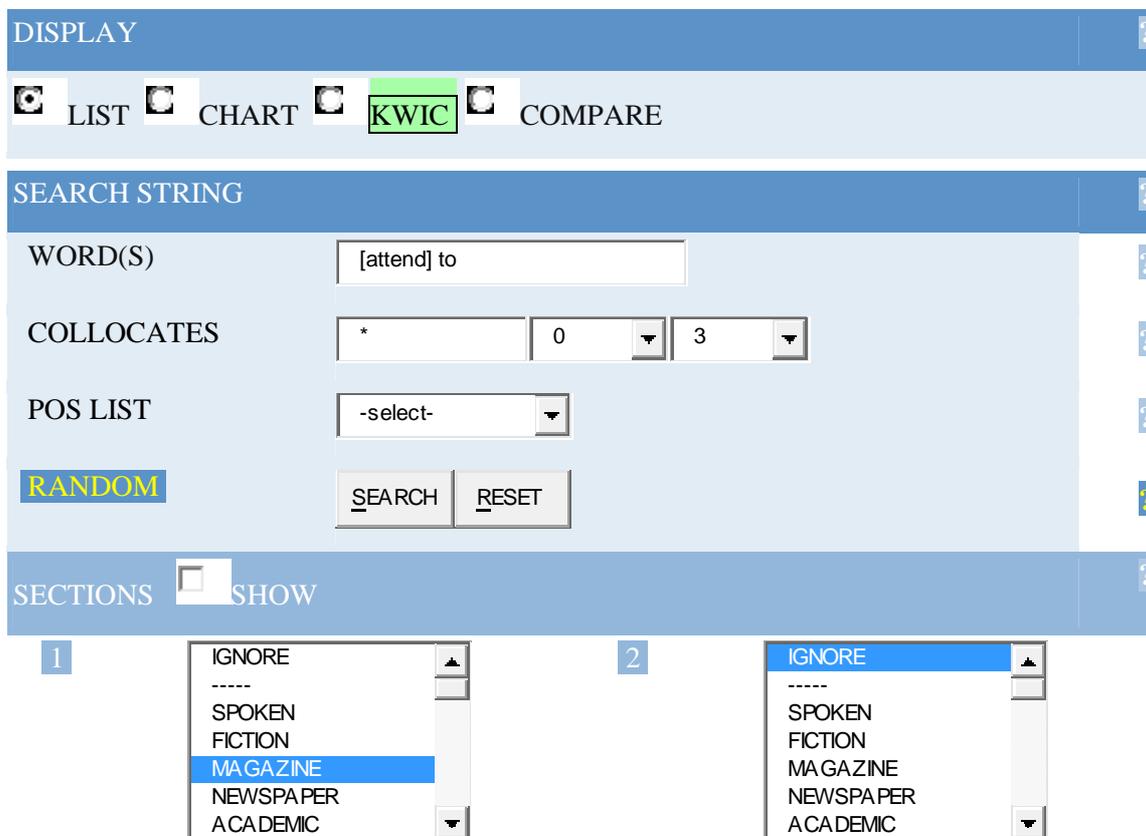
Figure 2

DISPLAY		?
<input type="checkbox"/> LIST	<input type="checkbox"/> CHART	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> KWIC
<input type="checkbox"/> COMPARE		
SEARCH STRING		?
WORD(S)	<input type="text" value="attend"/>	?
COLLOCATES	<input type="text" value="*"/> <input type="text" value="2"/> <input type="text" value="0"/>	?
POS LIST	<input type="text" value="-select-"/>	?
RANDOM	<input type="button" value="SEARCH"/> <input type="button" value="RESET"/>	?
SECTIONS <input type="checkbox"/> SHOW		?



The methodology used to search the data in the tables of collocates with “attend to” was to get collocations in the three sections that had the highest frequency of the verb “attend to”, i.e. academic, fiction and magazine sections. For each of these sections, to obtain the five most frequent noun and adjective collocations that follow the verb “attend to”, we searched the list display of COCA and set three words to the right and zero to the left, as shown in Figure 3. Hence, we could obtain the first noun or adjective that appeared after the verb “attend”. We put the verb “attend” between square brackets to get the verb “attend to” in all possible verb forms in COCA. Considering that “own” can be an adjective or a pronoun, we manually analyzed all collocates that appeared in COCA, one by one, and included only the adjective forms in the table.

Figure 3



Finally, in order to obtain the ten most common verb collocations that precede the verb “attend to” in each section (academic, fiction and magazine), we searched the list mode of COCA and set two words to the left and zero to the right; we did the same with the verb collocations of “attend”.

3 Definitions

3.1 Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners

The Macmillan English Dictionary is a corpus-based dictionary. It is based on three corpora: four million-word corpus from texts produced by learners from 16 different mother-tongue backgrounds; a 15-million-word corpus of academic writing produced by English native speakers; and the 220-million-word Macmillan World English Corpus, which provided the main language data for the creation of the MED (Macmillan, 2007).

MED highlights the most frequent vocabulary of English. The verb “to attend” is printed in red and has three stars, which means this word is among the 2,500 most frequent English words. According to Keddie (One Stop English website), this is a very useful feature of MED, since the highlighted words “*are the target words that any learner who wants to succeed at advanced level should aim for*”.

3.2 Definition of the verb “to attend”

- 1) [I/T] to be present at an event or activity.

E.g. *Lee moved to Berkeley in 1975 to **attend** law **school**.*

- 2) [I/T] to go regularly to a place, for example to a school as a student or to a church as a member.

E.g. *Almost 1 in 4 American adults say they sometimes **attend** religious **services** of a faith different from their own.*

- 3) [T] to look after someone, especially someone who is ill or someone in an important position;

E.g. *The physician may **attend the patient** when the medication is taken but is not required to do so.*

- 4) [T] *very formal* to exist with something else, or to happen as a result of it.

E.g. *Secondary symptoms usually attend the disease.*

(MED – p. 82)

Most examples to illustrate each definition were taken from COCA. The only exception was definition 4), which was taken from MED because we did not find any example in COCA, which is already an evidence of its low frequency.

3.3 Definition of the verb “to attend to”

- 1) [T] attend to sth/sb – to deal with something or someone.

E.g. *This would have allowed it to effectively **attend to** present needs and to look with confidence to the near future*

If you imagine I'm going to drop everything and come down to London before

*I **attend to** my **grandchildren** who just lost their mother, then you're mistaken.*

- 2) [T] attend to sb – to serve a customer in a shop, restaurant, etc.

E.g. Sena has to **attend to customers**.

(MED – p. 82)

All the examples to illustrate each definition were taken from COCA.

4 Frequency

4.1 Verb “attend to”

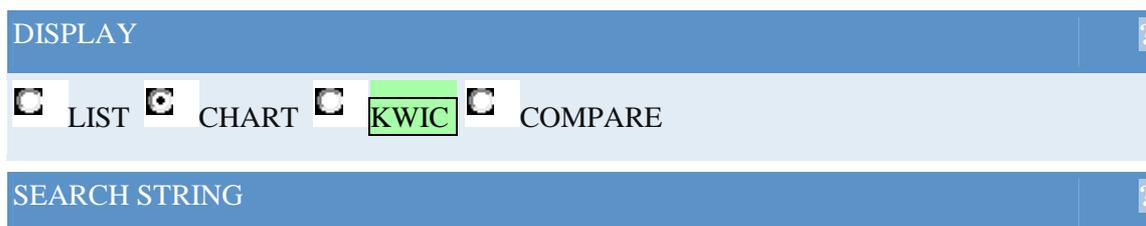
The verb “to attend to” appears with more frequency in academic texts, with 1,171 occurrences.

Table 1 – “To attend to” frequency

SECTION	SPOKEN	FICTION	MAGAZINE	NEWSPAPER	ACADEMIC
SIZE	90,065,764	84,965,507	90,292,046	86,670,479	85,791,918
FREQ	165	596	408	205	1,171
PER MIL	1.83	7.01	4.52	2.37	13.65

The data in this table were taken from COCA by searching the chart mode of the word “attend to”, as shown in Figure 4:

Figure 4



WORD(S) ?

COLLOCATES 4 ▾ 4 ▾ ?

POS LIST ▾ ?

RANDOM ?

SECTIONS SHOW ?

1 ▴

 SPOKEN
 FICTION
 MAGAZINE
 NEWSPAPER
 ACADEMIC ▾

2 ▴

 SPOKEN
 FICTION
 MAGAZINE
 NEWSPAPER
 ACADEMIC ▾

4.2 Verb “attend”

The verb “to attend” appears with more frequency in newspapers with 10,744 occurrences.

Table 2 – “to attend” frequency

SECTION	SPOKEN	FICTION	MAGAZINE	NEWSPAPER	ACADEMIC
SIZE	90,065,764	84,965,507	90,292,046	86,670,479	85,791,918
FREQ	3,278	3,420	7,061	10,744	9,248
PER MIL	36.40	40.25	78.20	123.96	107.80

We had to take each frequency from COCA, by searching the chart mode of the word “attend”. Secondly, we manually had to deduce the frequency of the word “attend to” in each section (spoken, fiction, magazine, newspaper and academic). Since the particle “to” is also part of the collocations with the verb “attend”, this way, we excluded all the occurrences of “attend to” out of the verb “attend”.

5. Collocations with written language and results

5.1 Attend

5.1.1 Attend + Noun

Table 3 – Attend + noun

	NEWSPAPER		ACADEMIC		MAGAZINE	
	Noun	Freq.	Noun	Freq.	Noun	Freq.
1	COLLEGE	257	COLLEGE	354	COLLEGE	162
2	SCHOOL	237	SCHOOL	276	SCHOOL	131
3	CLASSES	124	CHURCH	127	CHURCH	103
4	CHURCH	106	SCHOOLS	73	MASS	90
5	MEETINGS	73	CLASS	69	CLASSES	63
6	UNIVERSITY	46	MEETINGS	68	MEETINGS	59
7	CLASS	44	CLASSES	65	PHYSICIAN	36
8	SERVICES	35	SERVICES	48	SERVICES	35
9	MASS	34	CONFERENCES	45	UNIVERSITY	32
10	GAMES	34	WORKSHOPS	33	WORKSHOPS	25

In Table 3 we observed that all the ten common noun collocations with the verb “attend” are related to academic and religious events. Furthermore, there are six nouns (i.e. college, school, classes, church, meetings and services) which repeat in all three sections. It was found only one example which met the definition 3) *of looking after someone*, which was “attend patients”. This collocation was not among the ten most common nouns, neither among the list of a thousand collocations. All the other attempts to find another collocate failed. Moreover, we could not find any examples which fit the definition 4) of something that exists with something else, or happens as a result of it.

5.1.2 Attend + Adjective

Table 4 – Attend + adjective

	NEWSPAPER		ACADEMIC		MAGAZINE	
	Adjective	Freq.	Adjective	Freq.	Adjective	Freq.
1	PUBLIC	87	PUBLIC	92	PUBLIC	50
2	PRIVATE	69	COMMUNITY	69	PRIVATE	31
3	HIGH	56	RELIGIOUS	64	RELIGIOUS	29
4	LAW	41	PRIVATE	32	GRADUATE	27
5	SUMMER	27	PROFESSIONAL	30	MEDICAL	22

In Table 4, we noticed the adjectives “public” and “private” appear in all sections and the adjective “religious” appears in two of them. Once again, all the adjectives in this table can be associated to noun collocations related to academic and religious events.

5.1.3 Verb + attend

Table 5 – verb + attend

	NEWSPAPER		ACADEMIC		MAGAZINE	
	Verb	Freq.	Verb	Freq.	Verb	Freq.
1	WILL	270	MUST	69	PLAN	64
2	PLAN	160	PLAN	69	COULD	63
3	COULD	87	BE ABLE	63	BE ABLE	37
4	EXPECT	72	BE UNABLE	58	INVITE	32
5	INVITE	53	INVITE	56	MUST	28
6	SCHEDULE	49	REQUIRE	55	WANT	25
7	WANT	47	CHOOSE	31	REQUIRE	21
8	BE ABLE	39	WANT	31	BE UNABLE	20
9	MUST	29	REFUSE	28	DECIDE	16
10	REQUIRE	27	ALLOW	23	ALLOW	13

In Table 5, regarding verb collocations with the verb “attend”, we observed that six out of ten verbs appear in the three sections (i.e. plan, invite, want, be able, must and require). Other two verbs, i.e. “allow” and “be unable” appear in the academic and magazine sections.

5.2 “Attend to”

5.2.1 Attend to + Noun

Table 6 – Attend to + noun

	ACADEMIC		FICTION		MAGAZINE	
	Noun	Freq.	Noun	Freq.	Noun	Freq.
1	NEEDS	25	BUSINESS	22	NEEDS	18
2	STIMULI	14	MATTERS	8	MATTERS	7
3	ISSUES	11	DUTIES	7	DETAILS	6
4	ASPECTS	8	CHORES	4	KIDS	5
5	TASK	6	DETAILS	4	DUTIES	4

In Table 6, we observed that the noun collocations related to the verb “attend to” indicate connotation of obligation. There are four nouns (i.e. needs, matters, duties, and details) which appear in two sections.

We could not find any examples in COCA which fit the definition 2) *of serving a customer in a shop, restaurant, etc.*

5.2.2 Attend to + Adjective

Table 7 – Attend to + adjective

	ACADEMIC		FICTION		MAGAZINE	
	Adjective	Freq.	Adjective	Freq.	Adjective	Freq.
1	RELEVANT	8	OWN	12	OWN	7
2	MULTIPLE	5	PERSONAL	3	EXTERNAL	2
3	RACIAL	4	DOMESTIC	3	CONCRETE	2
4	UNIQUE	4	SO-CALLED	2	LARGER	2
5	EXTRANEIOUS	3	PRACTICAL	2	PRIVATE	2

5.2.3 Verb + attend to

Table 8 – verb + attend to

	ACADEMIC		FICTION		MAGAZINE	
	Verb	Freq.	Verb	Freq.	Verb	Freq.
1	MUST	34	MUST	12	CAN	11
2	SHOULD	28	BE ABLE	4	MUST	9
3	NEED	18	SHOULD	4	BE ABLE	4
4	BE ABLE	14	SHALL	3	NEED	4
5	ASK	6	NEED	2	OBLIGED	1

6 Collocations with spoken language

6.1 Noun

Table 9 – Nouns in spoken language

	ATTEND		ATTEND TO	
	Noun	Freq.	Noun	Freq.
1	SCHOOL	56	NEEDS	4

2	COLLEGE	52	BUSINESS	4
3	CHURCH	47	GRANDCHILDREN	3
4	CLASSES	24	PROBLEMS	3
5	MEETINGS	21	ISSUES	2

When comparing the table of written noun collocations with the table of spoken noun collocations with the verb “attend”, we noticed they vary slightly from one section to another. All the nouns in Table 9 are the same ones which collocate with “attend” in written language. Similarly, with the verb “attend to”, the nouns “needs”, “business”, and “issues” appear with both spoken and written language.

6.2 Adjective

Table 10 – Adjectives in spoken language

	ATTEND		ATTEND TO	
	Adjective	Freq.	Adjective	Freq.
1	PUBLIC	24	PHYSICAL	2
2	HIGH	13	PRIVATE	2
3	CATHOLIC	9	MEDICAL	2
4	PRIVATE	8	DOMESTIC	1
5	REGULAR	6	URGENT	1

In Table 10, “domestic” and “private” are the adjectives in common between written and spoken language.

6.3 Verb

Table 11 – Verbs in spoken language

	ATTEND		ATTEND TO	
	Verb	Freq.	Verb	Freq.
1	WILL	138	BE	21
2	EXPECT	28	NEED	8
3	PLAN	26	SHOULD	3
4	SCHEDULE	14	FAIL	1
5	INVITE	11	PLAN	1

In Table 11, “should” and “need” are the verbs in common between written and spoken language.

7 Conclusion

The verb “to attend” is most commonly used with the meaning of *being present at an event, either regularly or not*, matching both definitions 1) to be present at an event or activity and 2) to go regularly to a place, for example to a school as a student or to a church as a member. Furthermore, definition 4) of “to attend”, meaning *something which happens as a result of something else*, was not found in COCA. Finally, we found only one example of “to attend” meaning definition 3) *of looking after someone*. All things considered, we could conclude that not all different definitions in the dictionary correspond to a natural use of the language in this representative corpus of American English.

On the other hand, the high frequency of the verb in newspaper, academic, magazine and spoken sections shows that the verb “to attend” is a widely used English word worth to be learned by ESL students.

Regarding the phrasal verb “attend to”, it is possible to conclude that this verb is more frequently used related to dealing with obligations. No examples of “attend to” meaning *servicing a customer* was found in COCA, neither in written nor spoken language.

Finally, the verbs “attend” and “attend to” are both present in different texts, such as academic, magazines, newspapers and spoken language, but the frequency of the verb without the preposition is much higher than the phrasal verb “attend to”. Additionally, the frequency of the verb “attend” is twenty times higher in spoken language and thirteen times higher in written language.

References

- KEDDIE, Jamie. *Corpora*. One Stop English. – Available at: <http://www.onestopenglish.com/skills/vocabulary/corpora/>. Accessed on 17/09/2011.
- MACMILLAN. *Macmillan English dictionary for advanced learners*. London, United Kingdom: Macmillan, 2nd edition, 2007.
- SARMENTO, S. *Corpus linguistics: history, methodology and scope*. In: LIMA, Chris. (Org.) 10 Years of Brazilian Scholarship: British Council Brazil and the Hornby Trust. , 2011, v. 01, p. 73-85.

Abbreviations

[I]: intransitive verb that has no direct object

[T]: transitive verb that has a direct object

sb: someone

sth: something

MED: Macmillan English Dictionary

COCA: Corpus of Contemporary American English

ESL: English as a second language

EFL: English as a foreign language

CL: Corpus linguistics