How Dead? Investigating the Use of the Adverb 'Dead' by American and British People: A Corpus-Based Study

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Abstract: *It is common knowledge that American and British English are somewhat different in several aspects such as vocabulary, spelling, grammar, etc. These differences are sometimes not very apparent for Indonesian learners of English. Nevertheless, it is still important for Indonesian learners of English to be aware of these differences. In this research, the writer focuses on only one aspect of the difference between these two varieties, namely the use of adverbs. American and British people tend to use several adverbs differently, for example Americans tend to use the word 'pretty' as an adverb, whereas British people prefer to use 'rather.' Nonetheless, is this true for all other adverbs as well? Based on this, the writer has become interested in investigating the differences and similarities of the use of the adverb 'dead' by American and British people. To collect the data, two online corpora is used, i.e. COCA and BNC. The findings reveal that there are some similarities and differences in the way the adverb 'dead' is used by American and British people.*

Keywords: *adverb, corpus, American and British English*

Abstrak: Sudah menjadi rahasia umum bahwa bahasa Inggris orang Amerika dan orang Inggris sedikit berbeda dalam beberapa aspek seperti kosa kata, pengejaan, tata bahasa, dan lain-lain. Perbedaan ini kadang tidak terlalu jelas bagi pelajar Bahasa Inggris di Indonesia. Meskipun demikian, penting bagi kita untuk menyadari perbedaan-perbedaan ini. Dalam penelitian ini, penulis berfokus hanya pada satu aspek perbedaan antara kedua varietas ini, yaitu penggunaan kata keterangan. Orang Amerika dan Inggris cenderung menggunakan beberapa kata keterangan secara berbeda, misalnya orang Amerika cenderung menggunakan kata '*pretty*' sebagai kata keterangan, sedangkan orang Inggris lebih suka menggunakan '*rather*.' Namun, apakah ini juga berlaku untuk semua kata keterangan lain? Berdasarkan hal ini, penulis menjadi tertarik untuk menyelidiki perbedaan dan persamaan penggunaan adverbia '*dead*' oleh orang Amerika dan Inggris. Untuk mengumpulkan data, dua korpora *online* digunakan, yaitu COCA dan BNC. Hasil temuan menunjukkan bahwa ada beberapa persamaan dan perbedaan dalam cara kata keterangan 'dead' digunakan oleh orang Amerika dan Inggris.

Kata kunci: kata keterangan, korpus, bahasa Inggris orang Amerika dan orang Inggris

1. INTRODUCTION

English is used all over the world by speakers of different languages; hence, its role as a lingua franca. In other words, it is used as a common means of communication between people from different countries all over the world. It is used in numerous contexts, e.g. in education, business, entertainment, and many others. For example, between scholars with different nationalities, or when a Japanese business person wants to communicate with his/her client from Italy, English can be used to bridge the gap between them because as long as they share one language that they understand, they will be able to comprehend one another.

Although English can be used as a communication tool between people from around the world, it should be remembered that there are many varieties of English. For instance,

Singapore has their own variety of English which is commonly known as Singaporean English or Singlish. Countries like Malaysia and India also have their own variety of English. Nonetheless, these varieties cannot really be considered as a lingua franca as they are only normally used by specific groups of people and not used worldwide. Therefore, when we talk about English as a lingua franca, we usually refer to one of the three main ones, i.e. American, British and Australian English.

In general, these three Englishes are very much alike. They more or less have the same grammar, they share a lot of similar vocabularies, etc. However, it is also common knowledge that there are some differences between them such as in the spelling of some words, the use of different lexical items that basically refer to the same thing, the different usages of some adverbs, etc. For example, British people use the word 'flat' while Americans say 'apartment,' but they essentially mean the same thing. Another example in terms of the usages of adverbs is that Americans tend to use the word 'pretty' as an adverb, whereas British people prefer to use 'rather.' It is these differences that may sometimes cause confusion for learners of English, especially in Indonesia.

Considering that English is a foreign language in Indonesia, and the variety that we are most exposed to here is American English, the differences between American, British and Australian English can be problematic for us. We may not always know when to use the proper vocabulary as we are not fully aware which words belong to which variety. Even though the teaching of English in Indonesia includes the explanation of the differences between American and British English, not much emphasis is given to them. Moreover, descriptions regarding the differences between Australian and the other two varieties are practically non-existent in our English education. Therefore, it is important that Indonesian learners of English are made aware of these differences, so that we may enrich our knowledge of the different varieties of English.

In addition, there have been several previous studies that focused on the differences between these varieties of English. One was done by Tottie and Hoffmann (2006) who made a research on tag questions in American and British English. Their findings show that there are some differences between how Americans and British people use tag questions. For example, British people use tag questions more often than Americans, Americans prefer tag questions with 'do' while British people prefer using 'have,' etc. Another research was conducted by Collins (2007) who investigated the use of the modals 'can/could' and 'may/might' in British, American and Australian English. His study revealed that there are also some differences in how these three groups of people use these modals. For example, the modal 'may' which expresses possibility is becoming less common in American and Australian English compared to British English, while 'might' is becoming more popular in Australian English as opposed to American and British English. In addition, Liu (2011) conducted a research on the most frequently used phrasal verbs in American and British English. Based on the result of his research, it is found that there are some differences in the usage and frequency of some phrasal verbs between American and British English, such as the phrasal verb 'come on' which is much more frequently found in the spoken register in BNC compared to the spoken register in COCA. Lastly, a study by Romero (2012) compared how Americans and British people use intensifiers. The findings reveal that there is indeed a difference in the usage of intensifiers by these two groups of people. One example is the frequency of the intensifiers, where 'so' is the most frequently used one in American English while 'very' is the preferred one in British English.

The studies above show that the topic of the differences between American, British and Australian English has been receiving more attention lately. From this, the writer has become

interested in doing a small research on this as well. However, in this study, it is limited to the difference in the use of adverbs between American and British people. The adverb which is highlighted here is the adverb 'dead.' Based on this, the writer formulates the research question as follows:

"What are the similarities and differences between the use of the adverb 'dead' by American and British people?"

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Before describing the methodology of the current study, some related theories are briefly explained in this section. First of all, since this research deals with corpus, let us look at some definitions for it. The first is proposed by Hunston (2002) who states that corpus is a collection of instances of how language is used naturally. Moreover, Cheng (2012) is of the opinion that corpus is "a collection of texts that has been compiled for a particular reason." Based on these two definitions, it can be concluded that corpus is essentially a group of natural language use which is compiled in the form of texts with a specific purpose in mind. Since a corpus is related to the reason for which it is compiled, the size of the corpus may vary. For example, a general corpus such as COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English) might be larger in size compared to a specialized corpus like MICASE (Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English) which only consists of academic spoken English.

The next term that needs to be mentioned is collocation. Hunston (2002) defines collocation as "the tendency of words to be biased in the way they co-occur." Additionally, McEnery, Xiao and Tono (2006) mention that collocation is "the characteristic co-occurrence patterns of words, i.e., which words typically co-occur in corpus data." To put it simply, collocation is the common combination of words that can usually be found in corpus data. The combination of the words *conduct* and *research* is an example of this since it is common or natural to use these words together. There are two types of collocation according to Benson, Benson and Ilson (1997). They divide it into lexical and grammatical collocation. The first is concerned with the combination of dominant words like verb + noun, or adjective + noun, whereas the latter deals with the combination of a dominant word and a preposition or other grammatical structures. So the combination of *sound + argument* can be considered as a lexical collocation as it combines an adjective and a noun, while *search + for* is an example of a grammatical collocation since it combines a verb and a preposition.

The last theory that is described in this section deals with the definition of adverbs. Adverbs are words that can be used to give information about verbs (Reppen, 2012). What it means by giving information here is that adverbs 'modify' the verbs. For example, when we say that "He *spoke clearly*," the adverb *clearly* modifies the verb *spoke* in the sense that some additional information is given to the verb. In other words, the way that the person *spoke* is made more specific, i.e. the person spoke *clearly*. Some other words that are normally used as adverbs include words like *very*, *really*, *quite*, *rather*, etc. However, adjectives like *dead* can also be used as adverbs. For instance in the sentence "He *stopped dead* in his tracks," means that the person stopped 'completely.' In addition to modifying verbs, adverbs can also be used to give information about adjectives. For example, we can say *extremely difficult*, which means that the level of the difficulty is 'very high.'

After briefly reviewing some of the related theories, let us now look into the methodology of the present study. Firstly, in regards to the source of data, it is taken from two corpora, namely COCA and BNC because this study focuses on the difference between American and British English. COCA or Corpus of Contemporary American English is a general corpus which consists of over 560 million words. The words are taken from the years 1990-2017.

The source of the words is from spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, and academic texts. On the other hand, BNC or the British National Corpus is also a general corpus, but it only consists of approximately 100 million words. The words are also taken from spoken, fiction, magazines, newspapers, and academic sources, but it is also added non-academic and miscellaneous sources. The main data that is analyzed in this research is the frequency and collocation of the adverb *dead* in COCA and BNC.

Next, to collect the data, the writer inputs the word *dead* in both COCA and BNC. The word *dead* is specified into the part of speech of **adverb** since it is the focus of this research. After this, the writer looks into the frequency of this word in both corpora to see how often it appears. In addition, the writer examines the collocation of the adverb *dead* to see if there are any similarities or differences between American and British English. The part of speech for the collocation is set to **verbs** and **adjectives** because adverbs normally modify or collocates with these two. Furthermore, it should be noted that the search for the collocations is limited to 1 word to the left and to the right. The reason for this is that the collocations for the adverb *dead* commonly appear either right before of right after. Hence, there are usually now words that go in between the collocates and the adverb *dead*.

Finally, after all of the data is collected from both COCA and BNC, the writer analyzes them to find out the answer to the research question of the current study. The analysis is divided into several parts. First of all, the writer compares the frequency of the adverb *dead* in both COCA and BNC to see if there is a significant difference in the number of times the word is used as an adverb in American and British English. The context in which the words appear is also compared between the two corpora. Next, the writer compares the collocations for this adverb in both corpora to see if it collocates with similar verbs and adjectives. In addition, to make the analysis more comprehensive, the writer not only looks at the collocates from these two parts of speech, but the writer also examines the meaning of the collocations. This is done by looking at the concordance lines in which the collocations occur and comparing them with the definitions of the adverb *dead* found in some online dictionaries. The sources which are referred to here are the online versions of the Macmillan, Oxford, and Cambridge dictionaries. Last but not least, after analyzing the data from these three aspects, the writer summarizes the findings of the research in the conclusion and gives some suggestions for future researches dealing with the topic of the similarities and differences between American and British English.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the data analysis and discussion of the findings of the current research. To start, we are going to look into some of the definitions of the adverb *dead* which can be found in three online dictionaries, namely Macmillan, Oxford, and Cambridge. The definitions are as follow:

  a) Macmillan:
> ➤ completely = You're ***dead right***!
> ➤ very = That lesson was ***dead boring***!
> ➤ directly = I can see the station ***dead ahead***.

  b) Oxford:
> ➤ completely = The sight made him ***stop dead*** in his tracks.
> ➤ very = You were ***dead lucky*** to get that job.

  c) Cambridge:
> ➤ extremely or completely = The exam was ***dead easy***.

These dictionary definitions show that the meanings of the adverb *dead* are more or less the same, i.e. 'completely, very, extremely and directly.' These meanings are closely related to the words that collocate with them. For example, if the meaning is 'completely,' the word *dead* will most likely go together with words like *right* and *stop* because the meaning will be similar to 'totally correct' or 'totally halting.' On the other hand, it would not really make sense to say that the adverb *dead* means 'very' when it is paired with these two words because it would be inaccurate to say that someone is 'very correct' or something 'very stopped.'

In addition to these meanings, there are also some other specific expressions that go with the adverb *dead*. These expressions and their meanings can be seen below:

➢ *dead set against* something / doing something = to oppose something strongly or completely
➢ *dead on time* = at exactly the time arranged or expected
➢ *dead set on* doing something = determined to do something

These expressions and their meanings are more or less fixed in the sense that if the adverb *dead* is paired with the words above, the meaning would most likely be those specific ones mentioned above. So if the expression is *dead set against doing something*, then the meaning will definitely be 'oppose to do something strongly / completely.'

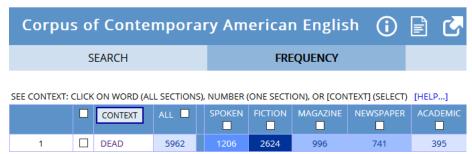Next, the data regarding the **frequency** of the adverb *dead* in COCA and BNC are presented below.

Figure 1. Frequency of the Adverb *Dead* in COCA

Figure 2. Frequency of the Adverb *Dead* in BNC

From the figures above, it can be seen that the adverb *dead* appears more often in COCA compared to BNC. The frequency for this word is **5,962** in COCA and **994** in BNC. Even though the difference is quite big, it should be noted that the overall corpus size of the two corpora is also very different; hence, the big gap in the frequency. Moreover, in terms of the context in which the adverb *dead* appears, it is most frequently found in **fiction** and **spoken** contexts and found the least in the **academic** context in both COCA and BNC. This is quite logical as the word *dead* when used as an 'adverb' is considered as informal; thus, it would most likely be found in **fiction** and **spoken** contexts but rarely in an **academic** one where the language has to be formal.

The second aspect that is investigated deals with the **collocation** of the adverb *dead*. The collocation is divided into two parts of speech, i.e. verbs and adjectives. The followings are the result of the collocations for both COCA and BNC:

SEE CONTEXT: CLICK ON WORD OR SELECT WORDS + [CONTEXT]   [HELP...]

		CONTEXT	FREQ
1	☐	WAS	450
2	☐	BEEN	322
3	☐	IS	258
4	☐	BE	221
5	☐	'S	196
6	☐	WERE	124
7	☐	ARE	123
8	☐	FOUND	109
9	☐	'RE	101
10	☐	'M	78
11	☐	PRONOUNCED	31
12	☐	AWAKEN	29
13	☐	CAUGHT	26
14	☐	SHOT	26
15	☐	AM	25

Figure 3. Verb Collocation for the Adverb *Dead* in COCA

SEE CONTEXT: CLICK ON WORD OR SELECT WORDS + [CONTEXT]   [HELP...]

		CONTEXT	FREQ
1	☐	WAS	90
2	☐	'S	78
3	☐	BE	45
4	☐	IS	40
5	☐	BEEN	39
6	☐	WERE	26
7	☐	ARE	24
8	☐	SHOT	22
9	☐	'RE	20
10	☐	FOUND	10
11	☐	'M	9
12	☐	BEING	4
13	☐	FOLLOWING	4
14	☐	GET	4
15	☐	LOOK	3

Figure 4. Verb Collocation for the Adverb *Dead* in BNC

SEE CONTEXT: CLICK ON WORD OR SELECT WORDS + [CONTEXT]   [HELP...]

		CONTEXT	FREQ
1	☐	WRONG	383
2	☐	SERIOUS	245
3	☐	SET	169
4	☐	WHITE	131
5	☐	TIRED	79
6	☐	QUIET	75
7	☐	DRUNK	58
8	☐	SILENT	58
9	☐	CALM	54
10	☐	RIGHT	50
11	☐	BROKE	49
12	☐	BLACK	44
13	☐	AMERICAN	42
14	☐	ASLEEP	38
15	☐	GRATEFUL	37

Figure 5. Adjective Collocation for the Adverb *Dead* in COCA

SEE CONTEXT: CLICK ON WORD OR SELECT WORDS + [CONTEXT]   [HELP...]

		CONTEXT	FREQ
1	☐	EASY	32
2	☐	RIGHT	23
3	☐	WHITE	17
4	☐	FUNNY	16
5	☐	SET	16
6	☐	BORING	14
7	☐	KEEN	14
8	☐	LUCKY	13
9	☐	STRAIGHT	13
10	☐	CERTAIN	12
11	☐	DRUNK	11
12	☐	GOOD	11
13	☐	TIRED	11
14	☐	CALM	10
15	☐	GERMAN	9

Figure 6. Adjective Collocation for the Adverb *Dead* in BNC

The figures above reveal that there are some similarities and differences in the verb and adjective collocations of the adverb *dead* in COCA and BNC. Firstly, it can be seen that the verb collocations in both COCA and BNC are mostly dominated with different forms of *to be* such as *was*, *were*, *is*, etc. However, upon closer inspection, it turns out that the word *dead* that follows these verbs is the word *dead* as an 'adjective' and not as an 'adverb.' In other words, even though the search query has been limited to the part of speech of 'adverb,' it turns out that COCA and BNC still have some problems differentiating when it is considered as an 'adverb' and when it is considered as an 'adjective.' Therefore, most of the verbs in both lists cannot really be considered as data. The one time that the word *dead* may be considered as an 'adverb' is when it collocates with the word *caught*. Of course, it should be highlighted that the *dead* here does not really refer to any of the dictionary meanings described above, but it is a fixed expression with a specific meaning. The complete expression is *would not be caught dead* followed by an action or situation, and the meaning is 'expressing a strong dislike or disapproval towards something' or 'would not want to be seen / caught in a particular situation.'

Moreover, in terms of the adjective collocations, it can be seen that COCA and BNC share some similar adjectives that collocate with the adverb *dead* such as *set*, *white*, *tired*, *drunk*, *calm*, and *right*. Even though the frequency of each word differ between COCA and BNC, these words at least make the top 15 collocates in both of the corpora. The rest of the adjectives are different. For example, although words like *wrong* and *serious* appear quite often in COCA, i.e. **383** and **245** times respectively, they do not appear at all in BNC. In contrast, the most frequent adjective that collocates with the adverb *dead* in BNC, i.e. *easy*, does not appear in the top 15 in COCA. Furthermore, it should be noted again that not all words in the lists above reflect the collocation of the adverb *dead*. Words like *American* and *German* show that the word *dead* is not considered as an 'adverb' but as an 'adjective.'

Lastly, in order to see whether the meanings found in the online dictionaries are portrayed in the data found in COCA and BNC, we need to look at some of the example concordance lines for some of the words. For instance, in the collocation *dead wrong*, the meaning of *dead* here is similar to that of the collocation *dead right*, i.e. 'completely.' This is illustrated in the following concordance lines:

Figure 7. Concordance Lines for *Dead Wrong* in COCA

From the concordance lines above, it is clear that the meaning of **dead** when combined with **wrong** is 'completely.' In other words, the collocation here means 'totally incorrect' or the level in which the person / movie is mistaken is 100%. Additionally, the meaning of 'extremely' or 'very' can be seen from the collocations **dead serious**, **dead tired**, **dead lucky**, and so on. The concordance lines below show this clearly:

Figure 8. Concordance Lines for *Dead Serious* in COCA

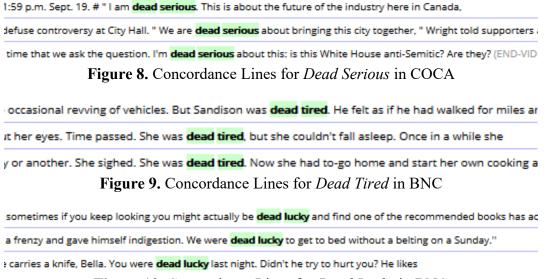**Figure 9.** Concordance Lines for *Dead Tired* in BNC

Figure 10. Concordance Lines for *Dead Lucky* in BNC

The adverb **dead** when combined with the adjectives **serious**, **tired** and **lucky** can be said to mean 'extremely' or 'very' because these adjectives can to some extent be 'graded' in the sense that there are levels in which we are serious, tired or lucky. These levels will of course include low or high, and to express a high one we can use **dead** with the meaning of 'extremely' or 'very.' In contrast, the meaning of 'completely' does not really suit these words because it implies that there are no levels. For instance, it would not really be accurate to say that someone is 'completely' lucky, since it would imply that the person is lucky 'all the time.' The same is true of the meaning 'extremely' and 'very' which do not really fit words like **right** and **wrong** because it is a bit strange to say that something or someone is 'very' right. These words are not really 'gradable' in the sense that there are no levels for right and wrong. It is more or less absolute; that is, you are either right or wrong, but you cannot be 'somewhat' wrong, or 'extremely' correct. Finally, the meaning of 'directly' cannot be found from the words in the figures above as none of them deal with 'directions' as in the word **ahead** from the example in the dictionary. Even the collocation **dead straight** is more concerned with the meaning 'completely' as it does not describe a direction, but more about a 'condition.' To be more precise, the adverb **dead** here means that it is 'completely / totally / perfectly' straight. It is not crooked or askew to any degree.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Based on the findings and discussion described in the previous section, there are several conclusions that can be made to answer the research question of the current study which deals with the use of the adverb *dead* by American and British people. First of all, in terms of frequency and distribution, there are some similarities and differences. The difference lies in the number of times that the adverb *dead* appears in both corpora, i.e. it is more frequently found in COCA compared to BNC. Although, it should be taken into consideration that the overall size of the two corpora are also significantly different. On the other hand, they share a similarity since this adverb mostly appears in **fiction** and **spoken** contexts and appears the least frequently in **academic** contexts in both COCA and BNC. Next, in regards to the collocation, there are also some similarities and differences between the search result in COCA and BNC. For the verb collocation, it is found that the top 15 collocations in both corpora mostly consists of different forms of **to be** such as *was*, *were*, *are*, etc. Of course it turns out that the word *dead* that follows these words is not an 'adverb' but an 'adjective,' so it cannot really be considered as part of the data for this study. In addition, the adjective collocations share some similar and some different words between COCA and BNC. The words that can be found in both corpora are *set*, *white*, *tired*, *drunk*, *calm*, and *right*, while the other words are different. Similar to the findings for the verb collocations, some of the collocates also show that not all of the *dead* in these lists is an 'adverb.' Finally, when looking at the concordance lines for some of the collocations, it is found that the meaning of the adverb *dead* in both COCA and BNC is the same as the meaning found in the online dictionaries, i.e. 'completely, extremely, and very.' However, the meaning of 'directly' is not found in the data that is analyzed as none of the words are not really related to 'directions.' To sum up, there are some similarities and differences in the way American and British people use the adverb *dead*. However, it can be said that the differences are not that significant and do not really affect the meaning in any substantial way. Therefore, as learners of English in Indonesia, we need not worry about the way we use the adverb *dead* when communicating with American or British people as both groups more or less use it the same way.

Last but not least, based on the findings of this research, there are several suggestions that the writer proposes. The first is related to the scope and limitation of the study. Seeing as the current research only focuses on one adverb, it is suggested that other aspects of American and British English are further explored in future researches. For example, we can try to investigate the similarities and differences in vocabulary, grammar, language expressions, etc. The next suggestion deals with the source of data. Since this research only takes the data from COCA and BNC, it is suggested that future researches refer to other types of corpora, or perhaps even try to interview some American and British people to make the findings more conclusive. Finally, with regards to the teaching implication for Indonesian learners of English, it is highly suggested that English teaching in our schools, universities, and even English courses is given more emphasis on the characteristics and similarities / differences of the different English varieties as it will surely be useful for us and help us enrich our overall knowledge of English.

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