

DECODING SUBTLE DIFFERENCES: THE SEMANTIC AND COLLOCATIONAL PATTERNS OF *CLEVER* AND *INTELLIGENT*

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates collocational patterns of the words *clever* and *intelligent* in English. This study was explored through a qualitative approach. Data from the British National Corpus (BNC) was analyzed using the UCREL Semantic Analysis System (USAS) to identify semantic categories and collocations relationships. The results revealed that *clever* and *intelligent* share a high degree of semantic preference similarity, with 16 out of 20 semantic categories overlapping, representing an 80% similarity in meaning domains. However, the remaining four categories were used by only one of the words, which shows that each word also has its own specific areas of use. In addition, from 311 total collocates found in the corpus, only 30 were used by both *clever* and *intelligent*. These findings suggest that while *clever* and *intelligent* are close synonyms sharing broad semantic preferences, the two are not completely interchangeable.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning lexical semantics, especially synonyms, is a challenge for non-native English learners because even though synonyms have similar meanings, their use is not always freely interchangeable (Edmonds & Hirst, 2002: pp. 105-144). Synonyms allow language users to choose the right word to express a more specific nuance. However, because of the large number of synonyms in English, learning their use becomes more complex (Laufer, 1990: pp. 147-155). In addition to meaning, dialectal variations, formality levels (Jackson & Amvela, 2007), and grammatical patterns (Phoocharoensil, 2010: pp. 227-245) also play an important role in distinguishing synonyms. It is important to understand words that frequently occur with synonyms (collocations) so that they can identify similarities and differences in meaning and communicate more clearly and precisely (Edmonds & Hirst, 2002:105-144), especially for L2 learners. Many of them struggle with synonyms because dictionaries often only present them as if they are interchangeable, without providing context for their use in different genres or clearer semantic preferences. In the study of synonyms, there are pros and cons about the similarity of meanings of words that are lexically similar. For example, Cruse (1986) and Quine (1951, pp. 20-21) state that no two words have completely identical meanings because each word carries different semantic nuances. An example of two words that have similar meanings is *clever* and *intelligent*.

Based on the definitions given by Cambridge Dictionary, Collins Dictionary, Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, and Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, the words *clever and intelligent* have the same core, namely the ability to learn and understand things quickly and easily. Cambridge Dictionary defines both words as the ability to "learn and understand things



quickly and easily." It emphasizes the speed and ease of understanding something. Likewise, the Collins Dictionary describes *clever* and *intelligent* with the ability to "think quickly and well" and "understand things easily." It indicates that both words are related to the speed of thinking and good understanding. A similar definition is also given by the Longman Dictionary, which states that both words mean the ability "to learn and understand things quickly." It also emphasizes the aspect of speed in learning and understanding. Meanwhile, Oxford Learner's Dictionaries emphasize that both are related to "learning, understanding, and thinking in a logical way." It describes the process of logical thinking that is fast and effective.

From the explanation above, questions arise, such as, is it true that both words are the same? In this context, Cruse (1986) stated, "This is the reason why true or absolute synonyms are nonexistent and impossible to find." It refers to the idea that two words that are truly synonymous or that have identical meanings in all contexts do not exist and are impossible to find. Cruse (1986) argued that although there are words that are closely similar in meaning or usage (called close synonyms), no two words have completely the same meaning in all situations and contexts. Each word has specific nuances or associations that make it different, even though its general meaning may be similar. Factors such as connotation, register, and context of use make two words that look similar, not completely interchangeable. Hu (2015, p. 117) stated that two or more words that have similar denotative meanings are not interchangeable in every context. However, Murphy (2010: p. 110) said that there are words that can replace each other in any context without any change in denotation or other aspects of meaning. This word is called an absolute synonym (Murphy, 2010: p. 111).

In addition to having the same lexical meaning, the number of tokens in the corpus of *clever* and *intelligent* do not show significant differences. This is certainly a driving force for research because the two words are quite balanced. In addition, both words can be found in the same dialect, namely British English. Based on this different understanding, this study will examine more deeply the semantic preferences in the use of the words *clever* and *intelligent*, how these close synonyms are chosen in different contexts by English speakers, and whether these two synonyms with similar definitions can be exchanged.

There are several studies that discuss similar themes. Szczygłowska (2023) compared the words *adequate* and *sufficient* in academic texts and found that *sufficient* is more often used in fixed expressions and stronger statements, while *adequate* is used with abstract nouns and has a more comparative tone. Selmistraitis (2020) studied pairs like *succinct* and *concise*, *coherent* and *cohesive*, and showed that each word is used in different contexts and registers. For example, *concise* is more often used with books, while *cohesive* is used with groups or collections. Lertcharoenwanich (2022) explored *blank*, *empty*, and *vacant* and found that these words appear in different genres and with different nouns. Ivanova and Medvedev (2023) grouped verbs like *destroy*, *ruin*, and *break* based on their meanings and showed how they are used differently depending on the context.

While these studies help us understand how near-synonyms are used differently, most of them focus only on describing meaning and usage. They do not explore whether these words can replace each other in real sentences without changing the meaning. This study fills that gap by looking more closely at the adjectives *clever* and *intelligent*. In this way, the study does not



just show differences in meaning but also explains whether the two words can truly be used interchangeably.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Firth (1968) defines collocation as the way that words tend to appear together in sentences. The line of Firth (1968), "You shall know a word by the company it keeps," means that words come from the things they are linked to. This view became the basis for the lexical approach that focuses on the distribution of words in texts. Then, Crystal (1980) and Cruse (1986) supported this idea by emphasizing that collocations do not only indicate grammatical associations but also reflect implicit semantic relationships that are not always compositionally understandable. The collocation approach has been further developed through corpus-based analysis. According to Halliday et al. (2004), collocations are expected word connections that show how speech meaning is linked. Sinclair (1991) uses the node-collocate scheme to explain how words relate to each other based on how close they are to each other and where they are in the text. Stefanowitsch (2020) added to this theory by pointing out the role of grammar, syntactic, and cognitive factors in collocations.

However, to understand the meaning of collocations comprehensively, a semantic framework is needed. It can be able to group lexical meanings into more abstract categories. In this case, the concept of semantic fields becomes important. Nida (1979) states that vocabulary in a language can be grouped into domains based on the same meaning components. Then, Trier (in Gordon, 1982) and Lyons (1977) developed this theory through a structural approach that maps paradigmatic and syntagmatic relationships between lexemes. Lehrer (1974) emphasized that fields of meaning are open and interconnected, forming a conceptual network in the lexical system of language. In corpus-based studies, the mapping of meaning fields is facilitated by a semantic categorization approach. The one who developed it is Schatz (1976), which groups lexemes into three levels: superordinate, basic, and subordinate. This approach was systematically adapted in the UCREL Semantic Analysis System (USAS) developed by William and Thomas (1997). It is widely used in automated semantic analysis. This system groups words according to 21 main semantic fields and over 200 subcategories (Archer et al., 2002).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach based on corpus linguistics to explore how the words *clever* and *intelligent* are used in different contexts. The data were taken from the British National Corpus (BNC) using Sketch Engine, focusing on words that appear within five words before or after each target word. However, Mutual Information (MI) scores are shown in the corpus to indicate word association strength and were not calculated manually. The focus of this research is to understand the meaning of *clever* and *intelligent* through their collocates, especially nouns that often appear with them. These collocates are grouped into meaning categories using the USAS (UCREL Semantic Analysis System), which helps identify the typical themes or domains connected to each word. This method allows the researcher to compare where *clever* and *intelligent* are similar and where they differ.



After the list of collocates was obtained, the collocates in the form of nouns were selected and analyzed using the UCREL Semantic Analysis System (USAS) to classify the collocations into semantic categories (Archer et al., 2002). The analysis was conducted in four main stages: (1) selecting noun collocates with a Mutual Information (MI) score of 3 or higher and recording their frequencies based on corpus data, (2) classifying the selected collocates into semantic categories using the USAS framework, (3) comparing the potential for lexical interchangeability by examining both overlapping and non-overlapping collocates in relation to their semantic preferences, and analyzing the shared collocates of *clever* and *intelligent*.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, the analysis focuses only on noun collocates since the adjectives *clever* and *intelligent* typically function to modify nouns in English. As noted by Sinclair (1991), adjective-noun collocations are particularly useful in corpus studies because they reveal meaning through real usage patterns. Collocates of *clever* and *intelligent* were extracted from the corpus using a span of five words to the left and right of each keyword.

From the complete list of collocates, only those with a Mutual Information (MI) score of 3 or higher were selected, as an MI score above 3 indicates a strong association between the adjective and the noun, thereby making the analysis more reliable. These collocates help identify the kinds of concepts each adjective is regularly associated with, which in turn reflects its semantic preferences. In other words, examining frequent noun pairings provides insight into the typical meanings and contextual functions of each adjective. When two adjectives share similar collocates, it often indicates that they belong to overlapping semantic domains.

The selected collocates were then classified using the USAS (UCREL Semantic Analysis System), which organizes lexemes into broad conceptual domains known as semantic preferences. Each preference is further refined into semantic tag sets for more specific classification. The results show that out of the 20 semantic categories identified from all collocates, 16 categories appeared in the collocates of both adjectives. This significant overlap suggests a high degree of similarity in the semantic preferences of *clever* and *intelligent*.

Table 4.1 Overlapping Semantic Preference

No.	Semantic Preference
1	Education
2	Entertainment, Sports and Games
3	General and Abstract Terms
4	Government and Public
5	Language and Communication
6	Life and Living Things
7	Money and Commerce in Industry
8	Movement, Location, Travel and Transport
9	Names and Grammar
10	Numbers and Measurement
11	Psychological Actions, States and Processes
12	Science and Technology
13	Social Actions, States and Processes



14	Substances, Materials, Objects and Equipment
15	The Body and the Individual
16	Time

Table 4.1 above shows that *clever* and *intelligent* are used in almost identical semantic contexts. The words *clever* and *intelligent* have a very wide and flexible range of semantic domains. The 16 overlapping semantic preferences found in the data cover a variety of areas, including academic (education), social (social actions), technical (science and technology), abstract (general and abstract terms), and biological (life and living things) contexts. For example, the education domain includes tag sets "education in general," showing how the words are used in school or learning situations. Social actions contain tag sets like "personality" and "politeness" related to human interaction. Science and technology include "computing" and "innovation," placing them in technical or professional contexts. The general and abstract terms domain covers things like "evaluation" and "comparison," which are more conceptual and not tied to physical objects. Lastly, *Life and Living Things* is considered biological because they include tag sets like "creatures" and "plants" related to living beings and nature. All of this shows that *clever* and *intelligent* are used to describe systems, tools, ideas, animals, and behavior.

The level of semantic preference similarity of 80% shows that *clever* and *intelligent* are often used in similar domains of semantics. This high number of overlaps means that the two words often appear in the same kinds of contexts. However, as will be discussed in the non-overlapping section, there are still specific domains where *clever* and *intelligent* do not appear together. These differences suggest that, despite their shared functions in many areas, each word also carries unique associations or preferences in certain semantic fields. This means that while they are closely related, they still have differences.

Table 4.2 Non-Overlapping Semantic Preferences of *Clever* and *Intelligent*

No	Words	Semantic Preferences
1	Clever	Emotion Architecture, housing, and the home
2	Intelligent	Arts and craft World and environment

The data in Table 4.2 shows that each word has unique preferences that do not overlap. Out of the 20 semantic domains identified, only four are found to be exclusive to one word. This suggests that although they are semantically close, they are not fully interchangeable in every context. In the case from Table 4.2, the word *clever* appears in one unique domain: emotion. This domain includes tagsets such as *happy*, *sad*, and *confused*, indicating that *clever* is sometimes used in expressive or emotionally charged contexts. Its presence here suggests that *clever* carries a more personal and emotional especially when compared to *intelligent*, which does not appear in this domain.

Meanwhile, *intelligent* appears in three distinct domains. The first is architecture, housing, and the home, which includes tagsets related to houses, buildings, and interior design. This suggests that *intelligent* may be used metaphorically to describe smart design, innovation



in living spaces, or anything related to houses. The second domain is arts and craft, which shows how *intelligent* can be associated with creative or skillful work, possibly describing artistic intelligence or design thinking. The third domain, world and environment, includes tagsets such as *geography*, *weather*, *the universe*, and *green issues*, indicating that *intelligent* is also used in discussions about global matters, sustainability, and science-based.

After identifying the overlapping and non-overlapping semantic preferences, the analysis proceeded by examining the lexical collocates of the words *clever* and *intelligent*. Most of these collocates appeared in the immediate left position (span -1), reflecting the typical adjective-noun structure in English, where adjectives usually precede the nouns they modify. Out of the total 311 collocates collected from both words, only 30 were shared by both, accounting for approximately 9.64%. This relatively small proportion highlights a notable difference in the lexical distribution behavior of the two adjectives.

Table 4.3: Collocates of *Clever* and *Intelligent* (5 Words Span Left and Right)

book	hands	parents
boy	horse	people
brain	humans	person
character	idea	reader
child	lady	software
computer	man	thing
creative	manner	way
dog	marketing	wife
eyes	mind	woman
girl	ones	words

This section analyzes 30 collocates that appear within a five-word span around the *clever* and *intelligent*. By examining these semantic tags, it can be better to understand the range, overlap, and distinctive features of the two adjectives in various contexts. Table 4.3 presents all the shared collocates found in the corpus, which are then discussed in detail according to their major semantic tag categories below.

One of the most dominant collocates found in Table 4.3 is from semantics preference (Table 4.1) social actions, states, and processes (number 13). This domain includes collocates such as *parents*, *boy*, *people*, *humans*, *person*, *character*, *child*, *lady*, *man*, *thing*, *manner*, *wife*, *woman*, and *girl*. Each of these is connected to specific tag sets. For example, *parents* is tagged as *kin male/female*, while *boy* and *man* are categorized under *people: male*, and *lady*, *woman*, and *girl* fall into the *people: female* group. These words all refer to human roles, behaviors, and social identities. For example, in the phrase “an *intelligent person*,” the adjective conveys high cognitive ability or education level. Meanwhile, the phrase “a *clever girl*” may emphasize social wit or quick thinking, often used in a more subjective or narrative context. Similarly, “*clever parents*” may refer to parenting strategies, while “*intelligent woman*” carries a tone of respectful evaluation. These examples demonstrate how both adjectives frequently appear in human-centered discourse to assess intellectual or behavioral traits.



Another collocate found in Table 4.3 is from semantics preference (Table 4.1) psychological actions, states, and processes (number 11), represented by collocates such as an *idea*, *reader*, *creative*, and *way*. These words describe cognitive concepts, mental processes, or modes of thinking. These words relate to mental or cognitive activities and are tagged with specific meanings: for instance, *an idea* is labeled as a *mental object: conceptual object*, *reader* is seen as a *conceptual participant*, *creative* reflects *mental actions or processes*, and *way* is considered a *mental object: method or means*. For instance, “a *clever idea*” suggests originality or inventiveness, typically in creative problem-solving. On the other hand, “an *intelligent way* to approach the issue” refers to logic and thoughtful planning. In literary contexts, “an *intelligent reader*” is someone capable of deep interpretation, while a “*clever reader*” might be one who catches subtle humor or irony. The use of both adjectives in these contexts shows their role in evaluating cognitive skills and conceptual awareness.

Then, collocates found in table 4.3 are from semantics preference (Table 4.1) the body and the individual (number 15) such as *hands*, *brain*, and *eyes*; these are tagged under *anatomy and physiology*. *Clever hands* often appear in descriptions of dexterity or manual skill, such as in “Her *clever* right *hands* wove the pattern with ease.” Meanwhile, *intelligent brain* is used in more scientific or formal contexts, e.g., “The *intelligent* women *brain* processes symbols quickly.” The collocate “eyes” can be used poetically: “*Clever* blue *eyes* spotted the trick” versus “*intelligent* calming *eyes* observed the debate.” These examples reflect how physical features are metaphorically linked to mental ability.

The semantics preference for (Table 4.1) life and living things (number 6) in Table 4.3 is also found. This semantics preference is illustrated by collocates like *horse*, *dog*, and *marketing*. *Horse* and *dog* are clearly *living creatures: generally male/female/neuter*, the word *marketing* is interestingly tagged under *business: selling*. For example, a *clever dog* may refer to a well-trained or intuitive animal, often with an affectionate tone: “That *clever* brown *dog* fetched the paper again!” Conversely, an *intelligent horse* appears in formal assessments of animal behavior: “An *intelligent horse* adapts quickly to training.” The inclusion of *marketing* in this tag reflects how abstract or business concepts are framed as adaptive and strategic, as in “a *clever marketing* campaign.”

In semantics preference (Table 4.1) science and technology (number 12), collocates on table 4.3 such as *software* and *computer* highlight usage in technological and artificial intelligence contexts. Both are tagged as *information technology and computing*. *Intelligent software* typically implies advanced computational ability or automation, e.g., “The system uses *intelligent software* to detect fraud.” On the other hand, *clever software* focuses more on ingenuity or user-friendly design: “a *clever app* that learns your habits.” Similarly, *intelligent computer* suggests machine learning capacity, while “*clever computer graphics*” relates to visual creativity.

The semantic preference for (Table 4.1) language and communication (number 5) in Table 4.3 is represented by *book* and *words*, where *the book* falls under *the media: books and words* are part of the *language, speech, and grammar* tagset. These items reflect how the adjectives are used in relation to discourse and textual interpretation. For instance, an *intelligent book* may refer to a dense, thoughtful work, e.g., “an *intelligent book* about politics.” Meanwhile, a *clever book* often means a witty or well-constructed narrative, such as “a *clever*



book full of plot twists.” The phrase “clever use of words” emphasizes linguistic creativity or rhetorical skill.

Therefore, semantic preference for (Table 4.1) general and abstract terms (number 3) in Table 4.3 is represented by the word *minds*, which is tagged as *caution (general abstract)*. This tag reflects highly conceptual and cognitive abstraction. *An intelligent mind* is often used in academic or psychological contexts, such as “He has an *intelligent mind* suited for research.” In contrast, *a clever mind* can suggest strategic or innovative thinking, e.g., “With a *clever mind*, she designed a new way to save energy.” Lastly, (Table 4.1) names and grammar (number 9) include *ones*, which is identified as the *pronouns* tag set. In examples like “the *clever ones* will figure it out” or “the *intelligent ones* understood the implications,” the adjective is used to refer back to unnamed subjects. Though semantically light, it reflects the structural environments where these adjectives operate.

Based on the explanations, the analysis of semantic preferences reveals that *clever* and *intelligent* share a high level of semantic similarity. Out of 20 total semantic preference categories identified through the USAS framework, 16 categories are overlapping, which means that 80% of their semantic preferences are shared. This strong overlap shows that both adjectives are frequently used in similar semantic domains. In contrast, four semantic preference categories (20%) are non-overlapping, which highlights that *clever* and *intelligent* also have distinct areas of usage. *Clever* appears uniquely in the domain of emotion, while *intelligent* has exclusive preferences in architecture and housing, arts and craft, and the world and environment. In addition, from a total of 311 collocates, only 30 words (9.64%) are shared by both *clever* and *intelligent*, based on a 5 word span in the corpus. This indicates a low level of collocational overlap, even though their semantic domains are largely similar.

These results suggest that although *clever* and *intelligent* are semantically close, they are not entirely interchangeable. Their overlapping preferences show shared general meanings, but their different collocational patterns and non-overlapping domains demonstrate that each word has its own lexical associations and distributional behavior.

5. CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that *clever* and *intelligent* are semantically similar but not completely the same. Out of the 20 semantic categories identified, 16 categories were shared by both words. This means that 80 percent of their semantic preferences are similar. However, the remaining four categories were used by only one of the words, which shows that each word also has its own specific areas of use. In addition, from 311 total collocates found in the corpus, only 30 were used by both *clever* and *intelligent*. This shows that even though they appear in similar semantic fields, their actual word combinations are often different.

These findings support the ideas of several previous studies. Edmonds and Hirst (2002) explained that even words that are considered synonyms can show different patterns of use when studied in a corpus. This study found the same thing. Although *clever* and *intelligent* are close in meaning, they show different usage patterns in different contexts. This matches the idea that meaning is not only found in the dictionary but also in how words are used. Hu (2015) also said that context is very important when we want to understand word meaning. This study agrees with that. The meaning of *clever* and *intelligent* depends on the situation. For example,



clever appears in emotional settings, while *intelligent* is more common in art or environment. In conclusion, the study shows that *clever* and *intelligent* are related, but they are not fully interchangeable. This supports the idea that close synonyms still have their own unique meanings and should be chosen carefully depending on the context.

This study is limited to analyzing semantic preferences and shared noun collocates to explore the potential interchangeability between the terms *clever* and *intelligent*. While these findings offer insight into how the two adjectives function with similar nouns, they do not capture the full range of their usage. Future research could conduct a more in-depth analysis by examining other types of collocates, such as verbs or adverbial modifiers, to reveal more clearer contrast in meaning and usage. This broader approach may help clarify to what extent *clever* and *intelligent* are truly interchangeable.

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