

## A Corpus-Based Study of English Synonyms

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Supakorn Phoocharoensil, Thammasat University, Thailand

**Abstract:** This study examines five synonyms in English, i.e. *ask*, *beg*, *plead*, *request*, and *appeal*, concentrating on their lexical, syntactic, and stylistic information. The data were drawn from three learners' dictionaries in comparison to the corpus-informed data. It has been discovered that the linguistic information from those dictionaries do not provide all thorough details of the words, e.g. grammatical patterns, collocations, etc. The corpus-based data seem to be useful as they contribute to supplying additional information not existent in the dictionaries. Furthermore, learners can search for more sample sentences of synonyms from corpora so that they will be able to have access to subtle meanings of them.

**Keywords:** synonyms, corpora, corpus-based data, learners' dictionaries

### Introduction

It is generally accepted that English is one of the most useful languages used by people around the world as a lingua franca. With English as an international language, people from different countries who speak different native languages are able to communicate with one another (Kirkpatrick, 2007). The language enables them to understand their interlocutor's speech. Meanwhile, they can also impart information to others through English. As a language with a long history and considerable benefits, it is not surprising to learn the fact that there exist millions of words in English. According to several studies, English tends to have larger number of words, if not the largest, than many other languages (Crystal, 2007). Some of the words have been borrowed from other languages (Finegan, 2007). Quite a few English learners could notice that there are a number of words, known as *synonyms*, which share similar senses of meaning or semantic features, e.g. *big* and *large*. The concept of synonyms plays an important role in English. Learners who wish to improve their English skills really need to be aware of and master synonyms. When writing an essay, for instance, they may learn how to replace a word with its synonym so that their readers will not get bored with the piece of work.

However, it is often found that, in fact, not all synonyms can be used interchangeably in every context. One has to be used in a particular context, whereas another is appropriate for some other situations. Some synonyms differ in terms of connotations they express, and some are different in regions in which they are used. (Trudgill, 1990; Jackson & Amvela, 2000)

Dealing with synonyms in English, the present study investigated five synonymous verbs: *ask*, *beg*, *plead*, *request*, and *appeal*, including the major similarities and differences between these synonyms according to their meanings, connotations, collocations, grammatical patterns, formality, and dialects. First, the information from standard learner's dictionaries, namely Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary

(OALD, 2005), Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE, 2009), and Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (CALD, 2009), was thoroughly considered. Next, corpus data were also consulted to see if there is any additional information apart from what is given in those dictionaries. Finally, all the information was concluded and these words were tabulated to clearly demonstrate similar and different grammatical patterns among them.

## **Objectives of the Study**

This paper is aimed at the following:

1. To study the lexical information, such as referential meanings, connotative meanings, and collocations, of the synonyms *ask*, *beg*, *plead*, *request*, and *appeal*.
2. To study the syntactic information, particularly grammatical patterns, of these synonyms.
3. To investigate the stylistic information, namely the formality of the context in which these synonyms occur.
4. To compare and contrast the information given in the learner's dictionaries with that from the concordance lines.

## **Literature Review**

Synonymy in a language can be viewed as a basic concept in lexicology. When meaning relations of words are studied, most researchers are inclined to prioritize the concept of synonyms in their investigation (Harley, 2006). Etymologically speaking, the term *synonymy* originates from a Greek word *sunonumon* meaning 'having the same name' (Jackson & Amvela, 2000, p. 92). Linguists interested in a study of meaning in language, known as semanticists, use this term to refer to a relationship of similarity or sameness of meaning between two or more words (Jackson & Amvela, 2000).

Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2009, p. 1479) defines *synonym* as "a word or phrase which has the same or nearly the same meaning as another word or phrase in the same language", such as *small* and *little*. In a study of synonyms, two major types, strict and loose synonyms, are worth being discussed.

### **Strict and Loose Synonymy**

Synonyms are normally divided into two main types: *strict* (absolute) and *loose synonyms*. As for strict synonymy, two words are considered strict synonyms if they can be used interchangeably in all of their possible contexts of use. Furthermore, the substitution of one word for the other must not result in a change in meaning, style, and connotation of what is being said or written. (Jackson & Amvela, 2000. In this case, it is the speaker's or writer's choice to use one or the other since either can fit in the same context.

Still, according to the above definition, such strict synonyms are extremely rare or not existent (McCarthy, O'Keeffe, & Walsh, 2010). As a matter of fact, strict synonymy is considered uneconomical since it leads to unnecessary redundancy in a language.

Normally if a language begins to have a word which can fully replace another in every context of use, one of them tends to somehow change its meaning or become out of use. For example, according to Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams (2003), in the history of English, the Old English word *frumsceaft* was widely used. Then with the flood of French words in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, the word *creation* was borrowed and it was used alongside with *frumsceaft*. Later on, *creation* took over *frumsceaft* completely in all contexts, making *frumsceaft* become obsolete. Such phenomenon is claimed to prevent the occurrences of strict synonyms in English (Jackson & Amvela, 2000).

With regard to loose synonyms, they are the most commonly found in a language. When linguists talk about synonyms, they generally refer to varying degrees of loose synonymy, “where we identify not only a significant overlap in meaning between two words, but also some contexts at least where they cannot substitute for each other.” (Jackson & Amvela, 2000, p. 94).

Clear examples of loose synonyms in English are the words *mad* and *insane*, both of which generally mean ‘mentally ill’. They are interchangeable in such a context as *The team of psychiatrists found out that he is mad/insane*. However, when *mad* means ‘angry’ as in *Lisa is very mad at Tim now.*, the word *insane* cannot be used in this context without a change in meaning, as in *\*Lisa is very insane at Tim now*. Additionally, the use of *insane* here also violates the grammatical patterns since the combination *insane at* are not likely to occur in native speakers’ speech.

The above examples indicate that synonyms can be interchangeably used where their meanings overlap, but where a meaning is beyond the shared area, one cannot substitute for the other (Thornbury, 2002).

### Criteria for Distinguishing Synonyms

Synonyms in English can be differentiated according to the following criteria:

#### Dialects

The first criterion one can use to distinguish synonyms is the regions where these words exist. English-speaking people speaking different dialects often use different words to refer to the same person, thing, or concept. For example, British children in a theme park would urge their parents to buy them *candyfloss*, a type of sweet made from sticky threads of sugar around a stick. In contrast, American children in the same situation would ask for *cotton candy* and get the same kind of sweet. Accordingly, it may be concluded that both *candyfloss* and *cotton candy* are the same, differing only in that the former is used in British English, whereas the latter belongs to American English.

The list below provides sample pairs of British-American synonyms.

#### British

football

American football

aerial

#### American

soccer

football

antenna

windscreen	windshield
aeroplane	airplane
vest	undershirt
lift	elevator
tram	streetcar

(Davies, 2007)

In addition, it is also found that synonyms different in terms of dialects are also common even in the same country. In England, Londoners tend to use one word, while those who are from Bradford regularly use another for the same referent. For instance, *armpit* is used in London dialect, whereas *armhole* is found in Bradford dialect (Trudgill, 1990).

### Style or Formality of the Context

The style or formality of the context in which synonyms occur is the second criterion one may depend upon when distinguishing synonymous words. In a pair of synonyms, one has a tendency to occur in a more formal context than the other. For example, the words *comprehend* and *intoxicated* are obviously more formal than *understand* and *drunk* respectively (LDOCE, 2009). One is not expected to use an informal word in a very formal situation and vice versa. It is very strange to see a notice in an elevator saying *no more than 20 guys* rather than *no more than 20 persons*. The word *guys* is much less formal than *persons*. By the same token, it will strike anyone as odd if their close friend in a nightclub says *Today my Dad sharply rebuked me in class*. The use of *rebuked* as opposed to *scolded* sounds too formal for such a relaxing atmosphere.

The list below gives pairs of words, one of which is formal and the other of which is less formal.

<b>Formal</b>	<b>informal</b>
peril	danger
pedagogue	teacher
conjecture	guess
ammunition	weapon
euphoria	happiness
immense	huge
lavatory	toilet
magnanimous	kind

(LDOCE, 2009)

### Connotations

In a study of two synonyms, it is frequently discovered that although the two share a referential meaning in referring to a particular thing or concept, they could differ in the emotive or expressive meanings they convey (Finegan, 2007). For example, the verbs *smile* and *sneer* do share a common action of making one's mouth curve upwards. Nevertheless, *smile* has a positive connotation as it is an action of expressing friendliness and happiness. On the other hand, the connotation of *sneer* is clearly negative. This word means "to smile or speak in a very unkind way that shows you have no respect for someone or something" (LDOCE, 2009, p. 1664).

Another pair of English synonyms which can best illustrate the differences in connotative meanings is the words *agree* and *concede*. Both do have a denotation in common as they refer to an action of admitting that something is true. However, the two words are different in their connotations since *agree* means one has “the same opinion about something as someone else” (LDOCE, 2009, p. 34), while *concede* concerns the fact that one admits the truth although one wishes it were untrue (LDOCE, 2009, p. 344).

### **Grammatical Patterns**

This is also a very interesting criterion one can make use of in order to distinguish synonyms in English. Quite often, words with a similar meaning do not have the same possible grammatical patterns. For example, the adjectives *able* and *capable* are regarded as synonyms of each other since they both basically mean having the qualities or ability needed to do something (CALD, 2009, p. 236). However, these two words occur in different grammatical patterns. The word *able* requires an infinitival phrase, as in

- a. Jonathan *is able to fly* Concorde,

By contrast, the word *capable* takes a prepositional phrase beginning with *of*, as in b.

- b. Jonathan *is capable of flying* Concorde.

Even though a. and b. are equivalent in meaning, one cannot alternate the grammatical patterns of the two words because doing so will bring about ungrammaticality in English, as in c. and d.

- c. \*Jonathan *is able of flying* Concorde.
- d. \*Jonathan *is capable to fly* Concorde.

### **Collocations**

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English or LDOCE (2009, p. 319) defines *collocation* as “the way in which some words are often used together, or a particular combination of words used in this way”. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary or OALD (2005, p. 293) gives a definition of collocation as “a combination of words in a language, that happens very often and more frequently than would happen by chance”.

In addition, the noun *collocate* refers to “a word or phrase which is frequently used with another word or phrase, in a way that sounds correct to people who have spoken the language all their lives, but might not be expected from the meaning.” (CALD, 2009, p. 268).

For instance, the noun *pride* has a strong tendency to co-occur with the adjective *immense*, as in *immense pride* rather than *colossal*, as in \**colossal pride*, which sounds awkward and unusual for native English speakers. Although *immense* and *colossal* seem to be close in meaning, only the former is selected to fit into the above context.

It is not so easy for English learners to decide which word is good or strong collocate that tends to co-occur with the headword. This is because language is arbitrary (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2003). English learners, while reading and listening, should try to observe as many collocational patterns as possible because such knowledge proves useful and could help them improve their English skills to a great extent.

## Data Collection

In carrying out this study, the data were derived from two major sources: learner's dictionaries and concordance lines. Concerning the dictionaries, three learner's dictionaries were chosen because this type of resources provides a lot of useful information, such as distinct senses, clear definitions, standard pronunciations, pictures, and example sentences.

Furthermore, useful grammatical information is given in these dictionaries as well. For example, if a noun is being searched for, the dictionary will specify whether that noun is countable or uncountable. If the search word is a verb, it will be identified as either a transitive verb or an intransitive verb<sup>1</sup>. Also for an adjective, a tendency of its possible positions is given. To be specific, an adjective may precede the noun it modifies as an attributive adjective, or it may follow a linking verb as a predicative adjective (Master, 1996).

Here three famous learner's dictionaries, namely Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD, 2005), Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE, 2009), and Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (CALD, 2009), were selected because they provide such information as mentioned above. Moreover, they claim that their data are drawn from natural authentic English based on language corpora.

In addition to the dictionaries, corpus data are also taken into consideration. In this context, the software tool selected was Wordsmith Tools (version 3.0), and the text used for analysis was from *Time* (1995), which represents journalistic language. This is considered a very convenient-to-use program which can provide concordance lines showing keywords in contexts. From the concordance lines, it is faster and easier to observe lexical and structural information about the keyword being searched for. Sometimes they even supply information on connotations of that word if we carefully and thoroughly scrutinize them. This way, some patterns associated with some special meanings can be observed. (Hunston, 2002)

It is assumed that the information from the concordance lines could add some more details or aspects not mentioned in the dictionaries. For example, some possible grammatical patterns, apart from those found in the dictionaries, may be given in the

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<sup>1</sup> A transitive verb needs an object, such as *eat, like, or buy*. In contrast, an intransitive verb does not require an object, such as *talk, jump, or run*.

corpus data. However, this does not mean that the corpus data mean everything. It is probable that certain grammatical patterns which are neither in the dictionaries nor in the corpus data might occur naturally in native speakers' speech. Because of this, basic search engines, such as *Google* and *Yahoo*, were also consulted to supplement the two main sources. However, native English speakers' intuition was not discarded in this study. Where there arose a problem or confusion which cannot be cleared up with the use of those above sources, native speakers were consulted with as well.

## Results

In order to investigate synonymy in detail, this paper was aimed at studying five English synonyms: *ask*, *beg*, *plead*, *request*, and *appeal*. The definitions of all the words are from Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2005), and each will be discussed in terms of meaning, contexts of use, and grammatical patterns.

In terms of meanings, all these words being studied share the same core meaning as they involve an action of "asking someone to do something". However, when they were investigated in detail, there are some interesting differences lying beneath their surface meaning. According to LDOCE (2009, p. 84), compared to *ask*, which is a basic one, the word *beg* implies anxiety or urgency of the speaker who really needs something to be done as soon as possible. As for *plead*, the word indicates that the matter being asked for is serious and important. It, put differently, shows more degree of seriousness than *ask*. In addition, the word *request* is concerned with politeness of the speaker as well as the formality of the context or circumstance (LDOCE, 2009, p. 1483). The word *appeal* deals with seriousness, urgency, and formality. Also, it can be used in relation to the matters in court or legal system (CALD, 2009, p. 75).

Moreover, some words in the list can extend its meaning to cover a metaphorical meaning. For example, the word *beg*, when used in an expression like *something is going begging*, has a metaphorical meaning as in *The cake is going begging. I'll take it*. It sounds as if the cake here were begging.

Now the definition of each of the words is to be given, together with its possible grammatical patterns obtained from OALD (2005) and the concordance lines.

**1. ask** (vt.<sup>2</sup>, vi.<sup>3</sup>) *to tell sb<sup>4</sup> that you would like them to do sth<sup>5</sup> or that you would like sth to happen.* (OALD, 2005, p. 75).

## Corpus data

1 ou were a member of a union, you could **ask** for representation, but there has never  
 2 helmed by the meat and I was obliged to **ask** for grown-up vegetables to accompany  
 3 ups of women struggled up with bags to **ask** for bread from the Chechen fighters.  
 4 If you are a member of a trade union, **ask** if they can supply a lawyer. You can  
 5 feel vaguely uncomfortable when people **ask** me for my autograph it's like, I'm m

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<sup>2</sup> transitive verb

<sup>3</sup> intransitive verb

<sup>4</sup> somebody

<sup>5</sup> something

6 at there's gonna be a wonderful party, so **ask** your mom if you can come wi  
 7 employers now accept that you cannot **ask** someone to perform at their best  
 8 Order, order in Flower Pot Language". I **ask** that you print an apology for this  
 9 weight is considered obese. You should **ask** the vet for an accurate guide to  
 10 ge and then leaves you to it. Best of all, **ask** the organizers if they will give y  
 11 ment of National Heritage next week to **ask** the Government to take their  
 12 ey should leave the engine running and **ask** to be shown identification through  
 13 house, it is the one picture that people **ask** to see above all the others."  
 14 or me I don't think I can make it. I will **ask** whether they can change my schedule

### Possible patterns of ASK

According to OALD (2005, p. 75), and the corpus data, the word *ask* is found to be used in the following patterns:

a. ask + sb + to-V.inf	as in	7, 11
b. ask + to-V.inf	as in	12, 13
c. ask + (sb) + for + sth	as in	1, 2, 3, 5, 9
d. ask + (sb) + if/whether	as in	4, 6, 10, 14
e. ask + that + S + V-inf	as in	8

As for pattern d, *ask + (sb) + if/whether*, means "to request permission to do sth" (OALD, 2005, p. 75). Examples from this dictionary are such as "I'll *ask* if it's all right to park here." and "She *asked* her boss whether she could have the day off." Also, this pattern can be used when we want someone to do something as in "I *asked* whether they could change my ticket." (OALD, 2005, p. 75).

2. **beg** (*vt., vi.*) to ask sb for sth especially in an anxious way because you want or need it very much (OALD, 2005, p. 125).

### Corpus data

15 says Clare, that he burst into tears and "**begged** me not to write the story." His rea  
 16 was shown to the court in which Smith **begged** for the safe return of her children, a  
 17 back of her shattered house. Rana had **begged** for mercy. "Please," she had scre  
 18 ng among those clever enough to have **begged** (from distracted friends), bartered f  
 19 i ssed it as melodrama. Occasionally, he **begged** Helena to marry him and help  
 20 , which killed 21 jews and wounded 62, **begged** journalists for the use of their  
 21 coming in. A judge at one of the shows **begged** some "Dallas" from me last year  
 22 challenge to the feminist order". Others **begged** to differ. Linda Grant, 44, another  
 23to nobody's very great surprise, the boys **begged** to return. The plea was accepted,  
 24ump said that the presenter had cried and **begged** to re-do the interview which  
 25 d then I shouted "Don't leave me here. I **beg** of you! But he didn't seem to listen  
 26 Finally Maria thought she should go. She **begged** that she be allowed to leave befor



### Possible patterns of BEG

a. beg + (sb) + (for + sth)	as in	16, 17, 20
b. beg + (sth) +(from + sb)	as in	18, 21
c. beg + sb + to-V.inf	as in	15, 19
d. beg + to-V.inf	as in	22, 23, 24
e. beg + that + S +V.inf	as in	26
f. I beg of you	as in	25

3. **plead** (*vt., vi.*) *to ask sb for sth in a very strong and serious way.*

### Corpus data

27 Scottish has met the prime minister to **plead** for a referendum on a Scottish assem  
28 had gone to the social security office to **plead** for a full disability pension to enable  
29 a is unconvincing. After all, clubs once **pleaded** that they could never raise the poi  
30 with officials in remote border posts, **plead** to be allowed on planes and trains f  
31 to Washington DC.. in a final effort to **plead** with you for my son's life ... I am  
32 to clear his name. Belgian newspapers **plead** with Mr. Claes to resign for the sake  
33 want the job: President Clinton had to **plead** with him to change his mind. Bu  
34 rought Yahia's mother to the airport to **plead** with her son. "In the name of

### Possible patterns of PLEAD

a. plead + with + sb	as in	34
b. plead + for + sth	as in	27, 28
c. plead + (with + sb) + (for + sth)	as in	31
d. plead + with + sb + V.inf	as in	32, 33
e. plead + to-V.inf	as in	30
f. plead + that + S + V	as in	29

4. **request** (*vt.*) *to ask for sth or ask sb to do sth in a polite or formal way* (OALD, 2005, p. 1155).

### Corpus data

35 and into Africa. Patrick Roper, 57, has **requested** 150,000 for the project  
36 jersey (extra large). The place recently **requested** a catalogue from the Old Fashio  
37 on casual business wear; 700 have also **requested** a fashion show or seminar. Dani  
38 ublican senator's daughter. It brazenly **requested** a special gift for her father  
39 Dutch soldiers in Srebrenica had not **requested** air support. The Dutch marine  
40 ed new product development. Reuters **requested** an MBA to prepare a pro  
41 scester complained of a headache and **requested** an aspirin. "Impossible," was  
42 The United States had **requested** British help to stem a new  
43 chairman of the 1922 Committee, and **requested** him to set the machinery  
44 ticipants allocated to placebo have **requested** that their calendar packs be changed

45 week. The Canadians said they had **requested** that the meeting be postponed.  
 46 anic depression last year, he has never **requested** that his case should go before  
 47 Lottery responsibilities on the council I **requested** the Secretary of Sate allow me t

### Possible patterns of REQUEST

- |  |                      |
|--|----------------------|
| a. request + sth                             | as in 37, 39, 41     |
| b. request + sth + from + sb                 | as in 36             |
| c. request + that + S + V.inf                | as in 44, 45, 46, 47 |
| d. request + sb + to-V.inf                   | as in 40, 42, 43     |
| e. <sup>6</sup> request + sth + for + sb/sth | as in 35, 38         |

For the word *request*, the information from the concordance lines is strikingly interesting since it provides more grammatical patterns other than those given in the three learner's dictionaries. The first point of consideration is pattern c: *request + that + S + V.inf*. It can be observed from the corpus data that the modal "should" is sometimes used alongside this pattern, as in 46.

46. he has never **requested** that his case should go before ...

The use of "should" here is grammatical as well as the subjunctive form. It is accepted by modern grammarians and is widely used by the native speakers of English (Swan, 2005; Carter & McCarthy, 2006).

Second, with respect to pattern d., all the three dictionaries provide only the use of this word in passive constructions, as follows:

- i. We *were requested* to assemble in the lobby. (OALD, 2005, p. 1289)
- ii. Visitors *are requested* not to walk on the grass. (CALD, 2009, p. 1210)
- iii. All clubs members *are requested* to attend the annual meeting. (LDOCE, 2009, p. 1483)

However, the concordance lines indicate that both passive and active sentences are possible in this context. The examples from 40, 42, and 43 are good evidence that active constructions naturally occur with this pattern.

The third interesting point deals with pattern e.: *request + sth + for + sb/sth*, which is not found in the three dictionaries but can be observed from the corpus data, as in 35 and 38.

### 5.) appeal (vi.)

According to OALD (2005), the word *appeal* has two senses of meaning which are closely related.

1. *to make a formal request to a court or to sb in authority for a judgement or a decision to be changed.* (OALD, 2005, p. 60)

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<sup>6</sup> This pattern is usually used in North American English. (OALD, 2005)

**Corpus data**

48 Mr. Simpson's defence lawyers **appealed** against the dismissal of a black male jur  
 49 for Cantona, who successfully **appealed** against a jail sentence for assaulting a cr  
 50 abandoned the appeal. She also **appealed** against a decision of September 5, 1989  
 51 will not let the case rest, and has **appealed** to the supreme court of justice in Bucha  
 52 were committed. The applicant **appealed** to the Court of Appeal, which on June 1  
 53 confiscation order by 7,000. he **appealed** to the Commission of Human Rights  
 54 U to sell it televised racing. He **appealed** to the court against the German agreem

**Possible patterns of APPEAL (1)**

- |                                    |                  |
|------------------------------------|------------------|
| a. appeal + to + sb/sth            | as in 51, 52, 53 |
| b. appeal + against + sth          | as in 48, 49, 50 |
| c. appeal + to+ sb + against + sth | as in 54         |

2. *to make a serious and urgent request* (OALD, 2005, p. 60)

Moreover, LDOCE (2009, p. 67) gives a more detailed definition of *appeal* (this particular sense) as "to make a serious public request for help, money, information etc."

**Corpus data**

55 to the nearby Mustapha hospital. It also **appealed** for blood donors. Security forces  
 56 eumann, secretary of the theatre school, **appealed** for help. Within days Mr. Shell  
 57c, backed the call for a referendum and **appealed** to the Prime Minister " In the na  
 58 C.C.P. had been rounded up. The radio **appealed** to Ghanaians to help the police  
 59 think it's going to be a cliffhanger." He **appealed** to voters to put maximum pressu  
 60 s always short of money and frequently **appealed** to its readers for donations. It  
 61 nent planning permission. The Gypsies **appealed** to the Secretary of State. David  
 62 ary return from the political wilderness, **appealed** to supporters at a closing rally at  
 63 had collapsed were not confirmed. He **appealed** to residents for calm. The local S

**Possible patterns of APPEAL (2)**

- |                                 |                  |
|---------------------------------|------------------|
| a. appeal + for + sth/sb        | as in 55, 56     |
| b. appeal + to + sb             | as in 57, 61, 62 |
| c. appeal + to + sb + for + sth | as in 60, 63     |
| d. appeal + to +sb + to +V-inf  | as in 58, 59     |

**6. Discussion of the Findings**

The five synonyms can now be distinguished systematically by the five major criteria mentioned earlier.

## Dialects

It is discovered that all of the five words being investigated are generally used in every dialect of English. In other words, none is found to occur specifically in a particular region. Yet, there are some idiomatic expressions which are unique to a specific region. The word that can illustrate this point is *beg*.

First, the idiomatic expression *sth is going begging* is extensively used in informal British English. According to CALD (2009, p. 120), “if sth is going begging, it is available to be taken because no one else wants it.”

Ex. If that bottle of wine **is going begging**, I’ll have it. (CALD, 2009, p. 120)

Aside from idiomatic expressions, some grammatical patterns are likely to appear in a particular area. For instance, as suggested before, in North American English, the form *appeal + sth + to + sb* is usually used, as in “The company has ten days to appeal the decision to the tribunal.” (OALD, 2005, p. 60).

## Style or Formality of the Context

With regard to the style or formality of the context where these synonyms occur, it is likely that the word *request* is used in a more formal context than *ask*, *beg*, and *plead*. The concordance lines apparently support this fact since it is shown that the word *request* tends to co-occur with the words expressing formality, such as *a urine sample* in (64), *adjournments* in (65), *anonymity* in (66), *the Gas Consumers’ Council* in (67), *the Secretary of the State* in (68), and *normal tennis attire* in (69).

64 to take it. The police sergeant then **requested** a urine sample. LORD JUSTICE  
65 derotti’s lawyers had successfully **requested** and received adjournments at past  
66 Both its buyer and original owner **requested** anonymity, but they are already the  
67 g of teeth. The inquiry, which was **requested** by the Gas Consumers’ Council  
68 ry responsibilities on the council I **requested** that the Secretary of State allow me  
69proclaimed: “Normal tennis attire is **requested**”. I have ceased playing tennis

Likewise, the word *appeal* also exists in a formal context as it refers to an action of either making a serious public request or making a formal request to a court or somebody in authority (LDOCE, 2009, p. 67). Both senses tend to have formal words as collocates, such as *a jail sentence* in (70), *prosecutors* and *conviction* in (71), *reconciliation* in (72), *penalties* in (73), and *sabotage* and *primal velocity* in (74).

70 for Cantona, who successfully **appealed** against a jail sentence for assaulting a cr  
71 She and the prosecutors had **appealed** against Parche’s conviction on a charge of  
72 decision to dismiss Carling, **appealed** for reconciliation on a broad front. “I think  
73 t the weekend that they never **appealed** for penalties and played in the charitable  
74 botage. Such primal velocity **appealed** to the numerous crowd-surfers riding

## Connotations

Although the five synonyms discussed in this paper share similar referential meaning, some of them are different from the others in connotations. Clearly, the word *appeal* in the first sense of meaning is associated with making a formal request to a court or anyone who is powerful, influential, or in charge of some important decision. It can be seen that the word *appeal* itself is neutral, but when it appears with the preposition *against*, a negative meaning is being expressed. That is to say, a semantic prosody plays a vital role in this context. A semantic prosody refers to “a consistent aura of meaning with which a form is imbued by its collocates” (Baker, Francis, & Tonghini-Bonelli, 1993). It is also defined as “the spreading of connotational colouring beyond single word boundaries” (Partington, 1996, p. 68)

The following concordance lines help confirm and support the semantic prosody of the pattern “appeal against”. Apparently the collocates of this pattern are mostly those with negative meanings, such as *the dismissal* in (75), *a jail sentence* in (76), *punishment* in (77), *conviction* in (78), and *the fine* in (79).

75 Mr. Simpson’s defence lawyers **appealed** against the dismissal of a black male jur  
76 for Cantona, who successfully **appealed** against a jail sentence for assaulting a cr  
77 days, though the South Africans **appealed** against Dalton’s punishment. But Ray  
78 She and the prosecutors had **appealed** against Parche’s conviction on a charge o  
79ide him. Williams and Benetton **appealed** against the fine and it is almost certa

## Grammatical Patterns

In addition to dialects, style or formality of the context, and connotations, another important criterion used to make a distinction between these synonyms is the grammatical patterns with which each of them tends to occur. Since these words are regarded as loose synonyms, they may not be used to replace one another in every context. For instance, the words *ask* and *beg* are close in meaning and they both also share grammatical patterns. However, there are a certain patterns that one can fit in, whereas the other are not likely to co-occur with<sup>7</sup>. So as to make these patterns easier to understand, Table 1 below is provided to show the shared and different patterns of *ask* and *beg*.

**TABLE 1**

A. Shared Patterns	
ASK	BEG
ask + (sb) + for + sth	beg + (sb) + for + sth

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted here that the information is drawn from dictionaries and a small corpus, so it may not be a representative of all possible patterns of these two words. The lists given might be inconclusive and probably some other patterns not present here could exist in a larger corpus.

ask + sb + to-V.inf	beg + sb + to-V.inf
ask + to-V.inf	beg + to-V.inf
ask + that + S + V.inf	beg + that + S + V.inf
<b>B. Different Patterns</b>	
<b>ASK</b>	<b>BEG</b>
ask + (sb) + if/whether	beg + (sth) + (from + sb)

With respect to phraseology, the word *beg* is an element of some idiomatic expressions or lexical phrases of which learners are supposed to be aware, when learning English. Examples of these are:

- *I beg your pardon*: this is used to ask sb to repeat what they have just said.
- *I beg to differ*: this is used in a formal context to show one's disagreement with sth that has been said.
- *be going begging*: if sth is going begging, it is available for anyone who wants it.
- *beg the question*: this expression is used to make sb want to ask a question that has not yet been answered.

(LDOCE, 2009, p. 136)

From these examples, one cannot substitute *ask* for *beg* in any of these fixed lexical phrases. Doing so will result in a peculiar and awkward combination which is not normally used by native speakers of English, as in *\*I ask your pardon* or *\*I ask to differ*.

The next word to be shown is *plead*. Its grammatical patterns are to be analyzed in comparison with those of *ask*, which is taken as basic.

**TABLE 2**

<b>A. Shared Patterns</b>	
<b>ASK</b>	<b>PLEAD</b>
ask + for + sth	plead + for + sth
ask + to-V.inf	plead + to-V.inf
ask + that + S + V.inf	plead + that + S + V
<b>B. Different Patterns</b>	
<b>ASK</b>	<b>PLEAD</b>
ask + (sb) + if/whether	plead + with+ sb
ask + to-V.inf	plead + with+ sb + for + sth
	plead + with+ sb + to-V.inf

It is worth noticing that for the shared pattern consisting of a that-clause, the word *ask* and *plead* are used in a slightly different way. That is, the that-clause following *ask*

requires a subjunctive mood; this means the verb in the that-clause is in the base form. In contrast, the verb phrase in the that-clause of *plead* does not have this requirement. According to the concordance lines, modals like *could* and *must* or verbs in the past tense form are used, as in *pleaded that they could never raise the money*, *pleaded that the declaration must be taken into ...*, and *pleaded that the deals were not binding because....* Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, because the corpus being consulted is limited, it may not represent every possibility of the occurrences of this pattern. We cannot jump to the conclusion that the structure *plead + that + clause* by no means takes a verb in the subjunctive form as *ask* and *beg* do. Chances are if larger corpora are explored, the use of subjunctive mood may be seen.

**TABLE 3**

<b>A. Shared Patterns</b>	
<b>ASK</b>	<b>REQUEST</b>
ask + sb + to-V.inf ask + that + S + V.inf	request + sb + to-V.inf request + that + S + V.inf
<b>B. Different Patterns</b>	
<b>ASK</b>	<b>REQUEST</b>
ask + (sb) + if/whether ask + to-V.inf ask + (sb) + for + sth	request + sth request + sth + from + sb

Table 3 shows shared and different patterns of *ask* and *request*, all of which are from both the dictionaries and the corpus data.

**TABLE 4**

<b>A. Shared Patterns</b>	
<b>ASK</b>	<b>APPEAL (1+2)</b>
ask + for + sth	appeal + for + sth
<b>B. Different Patterns</b>	
<b>ASK</b>	<b>APPEAL (1+2)</b>
ask + (sb) + if/whether ask + to-V.inf ask + sb + to-V.inf ask + (sb) + for + sth ask + that + S + V.inf	appeal + to + sb + for + sth appeal + to + sb + to-V.inf appeal + against + sb

Even though *appeal* has two senses of meaning, the two senses are very close. Moreover, some of their patterns overlap. This is why, in Table 4, these senses are merged together.

### Collocations

Since all the words studied are verbs, their main collocates are nouns and adverbs. Now we will discuss each synonym in relation to its collocates found in the corpus data and the dictionaries.

**ASK**

- a. ask + **sb** +  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{for + sth} \\ \text{to-V.inf} \\ \text{for + sth} \end{array} \right\}$
- b. **adverb** + ask *or* ask + **adverb**

**sb:** people, children, the private sector, the market makers, the board, the crew, followers, the government, manufacturers

**sth:** help, vegetables, bread, a drink, concessions, asylum, a review, food, aid, an injection, an application form, a transfer, curriculum vitae, discounts

**adverb:** repeatedly, formally, normally

**BEG**

- a. beg + for + **sth**  
b. beg + **sb** + to-V.inf  
c. **adverb** + beg

**sth:** the safe return, amusement, visits, an approach, mercy, denationalization, news, a chance, support

**sb:** listeners, me, them, member states, my family, Nick, the banks, the Vatican, the organizers, the fighters, the beak, the girls

**adverb:** always

**PLEAD**

- a. plead + with + **sb**  
b. plead + for + **sth**

**sb:** you, him, them, her son, a policeman, the Office of Fair Trading, ministers, the people of the United States

**sth:** a referendum, one's life, calm, funding, freedom, mercy, good behavior, more cash, greater tolerance, clemency, better treatment, one hour, more time, common sense, human decency, an international conference

**REQUEST**

- a. request + **sth**  
b. request + **sth** + from + **sb**

**sth:** money, a fish, a stay, a performance, a gift, a fashion show, a seminar, a meeting, justice, a review, an evidence, a delay in any ruling, a urine sample, information, air support, airstrikes, an urgent report, an application form, an update, an aspirin, gas masks, privacy, an action, the return of keys, removal, supervision

**sb:** shareholders, a passing waitress, her father, the authority, the Scottish Office, the police, him, journalists, Parisians, the plaintiff



**APPEAL**

- Sense 1:** a. appeal + against + **sth**  
b. appeal + to + **sb**

**sth:** the decision, the case, the dismissal, the order, the award, a jail sentence, convictions, the fine

**sb:** the Court of Appeal, the supreme court of justice, the judges, the High Court, the House of Lords

- Sense 2:** a. appeal + for + **sth/sb**

**sth:** understanding, the issue, calm, a change, blood donors, reconciliation, their release, help, the men's lives, talks, the fixture, an early opportunity, a pardon, penalties, information, a more generous statement, ammunition, hand ball, privacy, unity, mutual forgiveness, an amnesty, loyalty

**sb:** witnesses, blood donors

- b. appeal + to + **sb**

**sb:** the thieves, him, the media, Mr. Bell, children, the club, religious leaders, Tony Blair, China, her community, undergraduates, residents, the Allies, his party, Thatcher, mankind

- c. appeal + **adverb**

**adverb:** heavily, intellectually

From the collocates given above, it is necessary to bear in mind that these are only some examples found in the corpus and the dictionaries. The information we have may not represent every possible collocate of those synonyms. There are more collocates that naturally occur in authentic English and that could be discovered if larger corpora are further consulted.

The above analysis and discussion of these five synonyms help remind us that despite being similar in core meaning, these words in reality differ in some particular details or senses of meaning, connotations, styles, dialects, grammatical patterns, and collocations. From my teaching experience, it is often found that a great number of students often incorrectly use these synonyms. For instance, some of them use *request* in an informal context where *ask* is preferred. Some come up with an ungrammatical pattern such as *\*plead sb to do sth* by analogy with *ask sb to do sth*. Also, some use the incorrect pattern *\*request for sth* as opposed to *ask for sth*. In my opinion, the most noticeable area of difficulty for them is the use of grammatical patterns. They seem to carelessly use one word with an incompatible pattern according to the grammar of English. They probably rely their use on an analogy, ending up with using that word in a pattern of another synonym. Sometimes doing so works, yet unfortunately there are some other times this does not.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study has shown that most synonyms in English are loose ones. They are not interchangeable in every context of use. Their differences lie in many factors, viz. different denotative meanings, dialects, formality of the context, connotations, grammatical patterns, and collocations. This knowledge should be applied to English language teaching. That is, as English teachers, we should point out these differences when teaching synonyms, raising students' awareness of the concept of loose synonyms in English. In addition, we may help them distinguish synonyms of the same group by assigning them to look up different meanings and uses in learner's dictionaries. Also we can provide them with corpus data, i.e. concordance lines, so that they will be able to see some further information other than that supplied in the dictionaries. Hopefully, working with concordance lines should be fun and give students an opportunity to observe the data themselves and try to find a conclusion of the different meanings, usages, and patterns with the help of the teachers as facilitators.

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