



## A Corpus-based Study of English Synonyms *Clear*, *Obvious*, *Apparent*, and *Evident*: Implications for ELT

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyzes four English synonyms -- clear, obvious, apparent, and evident -- concentrating on meanings, distribution across genre, collocations, and semantic preference and prosody. The data were drawn from learner's dictionaries and the Corpus of the Contemporary American English (COCA). It was discovered that the four synonyms share the same core meaning but differ in terms of detailed meanings, collocations, semantic preference, and semantic prosody. *Apparent* and *evident* were found to be the most formal synonyms in this study. *Obvious* is mostly associated with negative meanings. *Clear* has a wide range of detailed meanings and is usually involved with nature and the physical world. The results of this study also shed light on ELT as they can guide teachers and students in practicing skills of corpora and applying them to classroom, autonomously.

**Keywords:** synonyms, corpora, distribution across genres collocation, semantic preference and prosody

## Introduction

Non-native English speakers who use English as a common language for communication now outnumber those who use English as native speakers and those who use English as second language (Jenkins, 2009). Vocabulary is considered the foundation of listening, speaking, reading and writing, which means it is important to the daily lives of speakers at every level (Webb & Nation, 2017). Understanding and use of synonyms is one aspect of learning that can influence the acquisition of vocabulary (Laufer, 1990). There are a number of criteria used to distinguish synonyms: dialects, level of formality, connotations (Jackson & Amvela, 2000), collocations, distribution across genres, and grammatical patterns (Phoocharoensil, 2010, 2020). A number of past studies have tried to distinguish synonyms, discovering that synonyms may share core meaning but differ in terms of detailed meanings, collocates, degree of formality, distribution across genres, connotations, or grammatical patterns.

This study investigates four synonymous adjectives: *clear*, *obvious*, *apparent*, and *evident*, which are identified as synonyms by the Oxford Learner's Dictionary online. *Clear* and *obvious* are in Oxford's 3,000 words that learners need to know, while *clear*; *obvious*; and *apparent* are in Longman Communication's 3,000 most frequent words. All four adjectives are listed in Longman Communication's 9,000 most frequent English words. Moreover, *evident* is included in the Coxhead Academic Word List (2000). The importance of these words, similarity in meaning, and frequency of use for both communication and academic purposes are why these four adjectives were chosen for this study. The data were taken from Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (CALD, 2014), Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English online (LDOCE, online), and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). This study aims to fill gaps in previous research. Some key criteria were not used (such as semantic preference and prosody), and the corpora used were older versions.

## Literature Review

### Synonyms

A synonym is defined in Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary 4th edition (2013, p.1596) as "a word or phrase that has the same or nearly the same meaning as another word or phrase in the same language". Palmer (1997) said that a number of word sets have members that share the same

meaning; this makes them synonyms of one another. According to Jackson and Amvela (2000), the relationship between two words with the same or similar meaning is called “synonymy”.

The two main types of synonyms are Strict and Loose synonyms. Strict synonyms (absolute synonyms) are two synonymous words that can be used interchangeably in every context while meaning, style, and connotation are not altered. However, this type of synonym is believed to be nonexistent. In history, whenever two words were almost becoming strict synonyms, one of them would change or be abandoned. For example, *sky* and *heaven* (Jackson & Amvela, 2000) used to represent God and the angels. However, the biblical meaning of *sky* is not used anymore, leaving only the physical meaning, while the spiritual meaning still exists with the word *heaven*. Clearly then, most or all synonyms are Loose synonyms. The way these synonyms substitute for one another depends on context; if their meanings overlap, they may be substitutable. If their meanings are not in the shared area, however, they cannot be substituted for one another. Loose synonyms overlap in meaning to a greater or lesser degree. One example of loose synonyms is the pair of words, *find* and *discover* (Jackson & Amvela, 2000). The meaning of *find* is “experiencing something in some way” while *discover* means “to be the first to come across something”. In the following context, these two synonyms are interchangeable: Lydia *found/discovered* the ball behind the garden shed. However, in the following context, they are not substitutable: Marie Curie *discovered* Radium in 1898 (Jackson & Amvela, 2000). In this study, the focus is on Loose synonyms.

### Criteria for Distinguishing Synonyms

In corpus-based study of synonyms, the following criteria are used to distinguish synonyms:

#### Meanings

Words in the same set of synonyms share the same core meaning but have different detailed meanings, as has been shown in a number of past studies (Bergdahl, 2009; Petcharat & Phoocharoensil, 2017; Phoocharoensil, 2010). Learner’s dictionaries, such as Cambridge Advanced Learner’s dictionary, Oxford Learner’s Dictionary, and Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, usually provide core meanings and detailed meanings of words.

## Distribution across Genres

In Applied Linguistics, “genre” refers to “different communicative events which are associated with particular settings, and which have recognized structures and communicative functions” (Flowerdew, 2013, p.138). A number of past studies used genre as a criterion for distinguishing synonyms: (Gu, 2017; Jarunwaraphan & Mallikamas, 2020; Phoocharoensil, 2020, 2021). COCA has been used in many studies, and is, in fact, the world’s most widely used corpus. Moreover, the newest version of COCA, which was released in March 2020, provides users with 8 different genres: spoken, fiction, magazines, newspaper, academic, webpages, blogs, and TV/movies. Among the reasons why distribution across genres should be used as a criterion for distinguishing synonyms is that it can be used to analyze the degree of formality of those synonyms.

**Table 1**

*The explanation of eight genres in COCA 2020*

Genre	Text	Words	Explanation
1. Spoken	44,803	127,396,932	Transcripts of conversation from more than 150 different TV and radio programs.
2. Fiction	25,992	119,505,305	Short stories and plays from various sources.
3. Magazines	86,292	127,352,030	News, health, home, and gardening, women, financial, religion, sports, etc.
4. Newspaper	90,243	122,958,016	Newspaper from across America. Different sections of the newspaper.
5. Academic	26,137	120,988,361	More than 200 different peer-reviewed journals from various disciplines.

6. Webpages	88,989	129,899,427	Web pages from the US portion of the GloWbE corpus.
7. Blogs	98,748	125,496,216	Texts, classified by Google as being blogs (taken from GloWbE corpus).
8. TV/movies	23,975	129,293,467	Subtitles from OpenSubtitles.org and TV and Movies corpora.
Total	485,179	1,002,889,754	

Note: Davies (2020)

## Collocation

Some words usually occur in conjunction with particular other words; this means that collocational restriction exists between them (Palmer, 1997). For example, *rancid* and *sour* share the meaning “having unpleasant smells or tastes” and are used to describe food that is not fresh. Saying *rancid butter* or *sour milk* (which are strong and natural collocations) is more common than *sour butter* or *rancid milk* (Crawford & Csomay, 2016, p. 40).

Collocation is defined as “a word or phrase that is often 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” (Cambridge Dictionary Online). It is the syntagmatic attraction between two or more lexical items, which may be morphemes, words, phrases, or utterances (Lehecka, 2015). Collocation is important because one of the elements of learning a new word is to learn which words it is used with. Furthermore, the development of learners’ awareness of patterns associated with a word helps with speech or writing as it prepares them to use the studied word in spoken or written context (Nation, 1983).

Partington (1998) said that when one synonym is replaced by another, the change in the meaning of the phrase may not be evident. However, one synonym may be more appropriate than others. This is why collocation is considered a key factor in distinguishing synonyms. For instance, the near synonyms *sheer*, *pure*, and *complete*, which are used to describe a state or situation that is absolute and does not involve or mix with anything else, are different in terms of collocations (Partington, 1998 as cited in Phoocharoensil, 2021). First, *sheer* occurs in the phrase *the sheer + magnitude word + of + noun phrase* and collocates with nouns that express persistence.

Next, *pure* appears with noun collocates that involve material/substances and religion/moral. Lastly, *complete* occurs in the pattern *the complete + noun/noun phrase*. Nevertheless, it does not occur with nouns that are multitude or force words. Usually, *complete* collocates with nouns such as absence, withdrawal, transfer, destruction, and disintegration (Partington, 1998).

## Semantic Preference and Prosody

Semantic Preference is defined as “the relation between a word and semantically related words in a lexical field” (Lindquist, 2009, p. 57). Semantic preference focusses on sets of semantically related words rather than pragmatic value. Typically, particular registers or genres are associated with semantic preference. The similarity between semantic preference and prosody is their reference to the meaning relations attached with collocating sets. The differences are that semantic preference is not involved with any sense of attitudinal meaning and it can usually be found among sets of collocation in corpora (Flowerdew, 2013).

Semantic preference depends on the grammatical environment where it occurs (Flowerdew, 2012). When *cause* (verb) is followed by one object, it is frequently an illness. For instance, smoking *causes* cancer. Nevertheless, when the verb *cause* precedes two objects, the second object is usually the feeling or emotion of being unpleasant. For instance, *causes* them inconvenience (Partington, 2004). Moreover, the type of corpus affects the variety of the semantic preference of a lexical item. The Business English corpus (BEC) and British National Corpus (BNC) provide different semantic preferences for the adjective *global*. BEC reports frequent occurrences of *global* in the following semantic sets: *global* product and *global* economic indicators. On the other hand, the occurrences of *global* in BNC are limited to two semantic sets: climate, such as *global* warming; and people, such as *global* viewer and *global* consumer (Nelson, 2006).

Semantic prosody is “the meaning associations that words carry with them by virtue of their typical collocations with sets of semantically related words” (Flowerdew, 2013, p. 164). It is “the discourse function of the word: it describes the speaker’s communicative purpose” (Lindquist, 2009, p. 57). For example, the verb *cause* has negative semantic prosody while the verb *provide* is associated with positive semantic prosody. *Cause* collocates with negative words such as *accident, cancer, damage, problems, and trouble*. In contrast, *provide* collocates with positive words such as *aid, assistance, food, opportunities, services, and training* (Stubbs, 1996, p. 173; as cited in Flowerdew, 2013). Another famous example is *set in* (a phrasal verb) which means *begin*. In COCA (2000s), *set in* is said to be associated with negative semantic prosody as the following

words occur as its collocates: *panic, economic depression, the cold war, lawlessness, unemployment, etc.* Semantic prosody can be employed by speakers and writers to convey positive or negative meanings without explicitly expressing their attitudes. However, to identify what is positive or negative depends on the researcher since, most of the time, it is difficult to distinguish (Lindquist, 2009).

## Corpus-based Study of Synonyms

A number of researchers have aimed to use the corpus-based approach to analyze and distinguish near-synonyms. Different learner's dictionaries have been selected to provide data based on corpora. Collocation dictionaries have also been used. Nevertheless, this type of study relies on corpora, and various corpora have been chosen. Some researchers even use software to assist their studies.

Bergdahl (2009) aimed to distinguish three synonyms -- *beautiful, handsome* and *good-looking* -- using the data from five dictionaries. The core meaning of "*pleasing to look at*" was found to be shared by the three synonyms. However, there are some differences; *good-looking* is neutral in terms of gender, while *beautiful* and *handsome* are related to female and male gender, respectively. In addition, COCA shows that, sometimes, *handsome* is used with woman.

Chung (2011) compared *create* and *produce* by browsing the data from the Brown corpus and the Freiburg-Brown (Frown) corpus. Two overlapping sense meanings between two synonyms were found, namely "*bring into existence/cause to happen, occur, or exist*" and "*create or manufacture a man-made product*". The two synonyms occur most frequently as *bare infinitives* or in the *-ed*. *Create* was found to be followed by objects with lower quantity and whose properties are not fixed, and those which are involved with creativity. *Produce* is followed by manufactured objects in great number, involved with low creativity, or used with farming.

Petcharat and Phoocharoensil (2017) analyzed *appropriate, proper, and suitable* by using data from learner's dictionaries, a collocation dictionary, and COCA. They found that the three synonyms share the same core meaning but have different detailed meanings, level of formality, collocates, and grammatical patterns. This study shows that the corpus contained more information than did the dictionaries.

Gu (2017) compared *obtain* and *gain* to see how they differ in terms of genre, colligation, collocation, and semantic prosody. Sketch Engine, BNC, and Just the Word were used in this study. It was found that *obtain* mostly collocates with concrete nouns, and occurs in passive form with a preposition. However, *gain* collocates with abstract nouns which are

associated with positive semantic prosody. In terms of genre, *obtain* is likely to be found in law and business, while *gain* occurs more in commerce and economics, politics and social sciences. This research concludes that some dictionaries have insufficient information regarding semantic prosody.

Phoocharoensil (2020) analyzed three synonyms: *consequence*, *result*, and *outcome*. COCA was used to distinguish these synonyms in terms of distribution across eight different genres. The results show that the three synonyms occur more frequently in the academic texts than in the other genres, which indicates that their level of formality is high. The occurrences of *consequence* and *outcome* are the lowest in TV/movies, while *result* occurs the least in fiction, which are all less formal contexts. The three synonyms were also found to be different in terms of collocations.

Jarunwaraphan and Mallikamas (2020) investigated *chance* and *opportunity*. The data from a learner's dictionary was supplemented by data from five genres of the older version of COCA. This research found that each synonym appeared in a particular genre more than other genres. *Opportunity* occurred more in academic than in spoken. By contrast, *chance* was used more in spoken than in academic. This indicates that *opportunity* is more formal than *chance*. In addition, the two words were found to be different in terms of collocates and semantic prosody.

However, there were some limitations to the previous studies. Some studies used older versions of the corpora. Some did not analyze semantic preference or prosody. The present study aims to fill these gaps as it analyzes semantic preference and prosody. Moreover, the 2020 version of COCA, which has more genres available for analyzing the level of formality, was consulted.

The present study aims to investigate the target synonyms with respect to the following research questions:

1. How do the synonyms *clear*, *obvious*, *apparent*, and *evident* differ in terms of meanings?
2. How are the synonyms *clear*, *obvious*, *apparent*, and *evident* distributed across different genres?
3. What are the common collocations of synonyms *clear*, *obvious*, *apparent*, and *evident*?
4. What semantic preferences and prosodies are synonyms *clear*, *obvious*, *apparent*, and *evident* associated with?

## Research Methodology

The focus of this study is on four synonymous adjectives: *clear*, *obvious*, *apparent*, and *evident*. They were selected for a number of reasons. Firstly,



Oxford Learner's Dictionary Online identifies these four adjectives as synonyms. Secondly, *clear* and *obvious* are listed in the Oxford 3000, a list of 3,000 core words that learners of English need to know. Thirdly, *clear*, *obvious*, and *apparent* are included in Longman Communication 3000, which comprises the 3,000 most frequent words (spoken and written) in English. Next, the four adjectives are in the Longman Communication 9000 list (the 9,000 most frequently used English words). Lastly, *evident* appears in the Coxhead academic word list (Coxhead, 2000), which means that this adjective is very formal. Therefore, it is worth comparing and analyzing these four synonyms.

For data collection, first of all, CALD (2014) and LDOCE (online) were used to list the core and detailed meanings of *clear*, *obvious*, *apparent*, and *evident*. Some information about degree of formality was also obtained. Next, COCA was consulted to analyze (by using the chart function) frequency and distribution across eight different genres for each synonym: spoken, fiction, magazine, newspaper, academic, websites, blogs, and TV/movies. Next, the collocates function of COCA was browsed to observe noun collocates and adverb collocates of each synonym. In this study, the mutual information (MI) score is used to select collocates with the highest frequency on COCA. Nouns and adverbs that occur with MI score of 3 or more are considered collocates of each synonym. Schmitt (2010) said that it is necessary that MI score is used in conjunction with frequency because the total frequency of some collocates (with very high MI value) may be low in a corpus. Therefore, in the present study, the top 30 noun collocates and the 20 adverb collocates with the highest frequency (MI score  $\geq 3.00$ ) were listed. .

For data analysis, firstly, the meanings of *clear*, *obvious*, *apparent*, and *evident* that were taken from CALD (2014) and LDOCE (online) were analyzed for similarities and differences. Some information about degree of formality was also analyzed. Secondly, the data about distribution across eight different genres of each synonym from COCA were ranked and tabulated to analyze the degree of formality. Thirdly, the collocates of the four synonyms were analyzed to see which semantic prosody and preference each is associated with. Lastly, the data from the two learner's dictionaries were compared with those of COCA to see which source provided more information about degree of formality and collocations.

## Results and Discussion

### Meaning

The information from CALD (2014) and LDOCE (online) shows that *clear*, *obvious*, *apparent*, and *evident* share the core meaning of *easy to see, notice, or understand*. However, there are differences between them.

First, *obvious* also means *easy to recognize*. It is also used with two situations: *a behavior of wanting something very much even when other people think that the behavior is unsuitable and when other people cannot see something which surprises you*. This also indicates that *obvious* is associated with negative senses of meaning. Second, *apparent* also means *something that seems to exist or be true* (CALD, 2014) and *something that seems to have a particular feeling or attitude, though this may not be true* (LDOCE, online). Third, *evident* does not have any detailed meanings. Nevertheless, the example sentences for *evident* published in the two dictionaries show that this adjective is used in sentences which include some information or evidence that is enough to make the reader or listener understand the context. Examples include, “From the smell it was evident that the drains had been blocked for several days” (CALD, 2014, p. 63) and “The growing popularity of the subject is evident in the numbers of students wanting to study it” (LDOCE, online). In the first sentence, *the smell* is the evidence of the blocked drains, while, in the second sentence, the popularity of the subject is supported by “*the number of students*”.

Lastly, *clear* also means *easy to hear, read or see through (rather than coloured or dirty)*. In addition, 17 detailed meanings of *clear* were found: 1) certain or sure about something 2) Impossible to doubt, question, or make a mistake about 3) Describing something that is easy to remember 4) Thinking – without confusion (able to think well with sensibility and quickness) 5) Not busy 6) Describing a period of time that is free from plan 7) Not blocked/covered 8) Without difficulties or problems 9) Away from something, not touching 10) Pure 11) Substance/liquid – easy to see through 12) Clean and fresh weather (without cloud or mist) 13) Healthy and pure eyes (without redness) 14) Smooth skin (without red spot) 15) Pleasant and pure sound 16) Not guilty 17) Describing an amount of money left after all necessary payments or taxes. This indicates that *clear*, in contrast with other synonyms in this study, covers a wide range of meanings and is more involved with physical world including objects, materials, substances, and nature.

## Distribution across Genres

### Table 2

*Distribution of clear, obvious, apparent, and evident across eight genres according to frequency*

Clear			Obvious		
Genre	Frequency	Per Million	Genre	Frequency	Per Million
Spoken	27,587	218.71	Blogs	12,157	94.52
Websites	27,165	218.63	Websites	10,158	81.75
Academic	25,572	213.47	Academic	7,476	62.41
Blogs	26,686	207.49	Magazines	7,359	58.36
Magazines	24,353	193.14	Fiction	6,230	52.65
Fiction	21,431	181.12	Newspapers	4,869	39.99
Newspapers	20,962	172.18	Spoken	4,486	35.56
TV/movies	22,041	172.1	TV/movies	3,998	31.22
Total	195,797		Total	56,733	
Apparent			Evident		
Genre	Frequency	Per Million	Genre	Frequency	Per Million
Academic	7,672	64.05	Academic	6,710	56.01
Magazines	4,231	33.56	Websites	2,402	19.33
Websites	4,018	32.34	Magazines	2,082	16.51
Newspapers	3,415	28.05	Newspapers	1,841	15.12
Blogs	3,333	25.91	Blogs	1,750	13.61
Fiction	1,960	16.56	Fiction	861	7.28
Spoken	1,774	14.06	Spoken	710	5.63
TV/movies	599	4.68	TV/movies	135	1.05
Total	27,002		Total	16,491	

The total frequency of *clear* (195,797) is higher than the other three synonyms combined: *obvious* (56,733), *apparent* (27,002), and *evident* (16,491). The four synonyms' occurrences are high in academic texts, and the occurrences of *apparent* and *evident* are the highest in this genre. It is also the third highest for *clear* and *obvious*. As a result, the four synonyms in this study are all considered formal.

For *clear*, its occurrence in the spoken genre is the highest, while its occurrences in Fiction and Newspapers, despite being among the three lowest genres, have frequencies that are far greater than those of the other three synonyms for the same genres. Accordingly, *clear* is considered the most informal of the four words in this study, and it can be used both formally and informally.

For *obvious*, the three most frequent genres are blogs, websites, and academic, respectively. Websites and blogs, which are new genres which were added to the new COCA in 2020, are found to be formal texts (Phoocharoensil, 2020). As a result, *obvious* is considered formal.

Next, *apparent* and *evident* are similar as their five most frequent genres are almost the same: academic, magazines, websites, newspapers, and blogs

for *apparent*; and academic, websites, magazines, newspapers, and blogs for *evident*. According to Davies (2020), newspapers and magazines are somewhere between formal and informal. This means that the top five genres of these two adjectives are more formal than their three lowest genres (which are all informal types). Therefore, the degree of formality of *apparent* and *evident* are very high.

The low frequency of use of *apparent* and *evident* in the genres of fiction, spoken, and TV/movies show that they are less common in colloquial English. Furthermore, the four lowest genres of *obvious* are informal texts. This indicates that *obvious*, *apparent*, and *evident* are more associated with formal language. Interestingly, CALD (2014) states that *evident* is more formal than *obvious*. Therefore, *apparent* and *evident* are the most formal synonyms in this study, followed by *obvious*. *Clear* is the most informal synonym in this study; however, this adjective can also be used formally.

## Collocations

**Table 3**

*Noun collocates of clear, obvious, apparent, and evident from COCA*

Rank	Clear			Obvious		
	Noun Collocate	Frequency	MI Score	Noun Collocate	Frequency	MI Score
1	Message	1,985	3.49	Reason	1,999	3.89
2	Sky	1,817	4.27	Answer	894	3.91
3	Understanding	1,023	3.37	Choice	702	3.27
4	Plastic	777	3.62	Example	477	3.06
5	Indication	676	4.76	Solution	425	3.44
6	Channel	617	3.40	Conclusion	288	3.49
7	Distinction	594	4.25	Explanation	180	3.19
8	Signal	562	3.33	Implication	164	3.54
9	Conscience	433	4.55	Flaw	128	4.50
10	Violation	375	3.33	Bias	104	3.46
11	Implication	354	3.08	Parallel	81	4.51
12	Objective	327	3.09	Similarity	79	3.83
13	Mandate	273	3.31	Affection	51	3.43
14	Intent	261	3.44	Contradiction	51	3.67
15	Liquid	237	3.91	Manifestation	44	3.81
16	Brook	113	5.48	Disadvantage	43	3.70
17	Front-runner	81	4.13	Drawback	41	4.60
18	Directive	76	3.20	Defect	36	3.33
19	Prose	69	3.12	Disdain	38	4.35
20	Delineation	66	6.31	Troll	34	3.26
21	Polish	63	3.59	Discomfort	34	3.45
22	Gel	61	3.17	Downside	33	3.87

23	Demarcation	61	5.93	Beneficiary	29	3.07
24	Articulation	56	3.98	Omission	27	4.02
25	Sailing	50	3.72	Fallacy	27	4.08
26	Vinyl	44	3.11	Ploy	27	4.50
27	Gloss	41	3.59	Deficiency	26	3.07
28	Complexion	34	3.17	Shortcoming	25	3.58
29	Mucus	32	4.14	Inconsistency	25	3.75
30	Acrylic	26	3.85	Reluctance	23	3.47
Rank	Apparent			Evident		
	Noun Collocate	Frequency	MI Score	Noun Collocate	Frequency	MI Score
1	Reason	811	3.66	Pattern	138	3.68
2	Lack	351	4.36	Trend	122	4.13
3	Suicide	259	5.05	Influence	75	3.25
4	Contradiction	211	6.79	Tension	39	3.29
5	Attempt	170	3.44	Frustration	30	3.55
6	Trend	128	3.49	Pride	29	3.13
7	Conflict	127	3.12	Bias	25	3.19
8	Reference	125	3.40	Enthusiasm	19	3.28
9	Diameter	107	5.85	Popularity	17	3.20
10	Inconsistency	82	6.53	Delight	14	3.35
11	Violation	73	3.61	Disparity	14	3.85
12	Paradox	73	5.77	Socialization	13	5.08
13	Brightness	73	6.26	Distress	12	3.04
14	Magnitude	67	4.35	Contradiction	12	3.36
15	Inability	67	4.79	Variability	12	3.86
16	Ease	63	4.45	Empathy	11	3.39
17	Absence	56	3.17	Reluctance	10	4.05
18	Confusion	54	3.66	Sincerity	10	4.68
19	Motive	54	3.76	Continuity	9	3.32
20	Willingness	52	4.21	Dedication	9	3.34
21	Discrepancy	52	5.32	Hypocrisy	9	3.75
22	Weakness	49	3.52	Divide	8	3.11
23	Similarity	44	4.06	Discrepancy	7	3.14
24	Indifference	41	5.46	Sensibility	7	3.22
25	Bias	36	3.00	Superiority	7	3.42
26	Anomaly	36	4.87	Shortcoming	7	3.52
27	Overdose	35	5.76	Exhaustion	7	3.62
28	Irony	31	3.51	Differentiation	7	3.74
29	Simplicity	29	4.44	Irritation	7	3.98
30	Retaliation	28	4.83	Charisma	6	4.17

There is no single noun collocate shared by all four synonyms in this study; however, there are two shared by *obvious*, *apparent*, and *evident*: bias and contradiction. Nine noun collocates were found to be shared by two synonyms: *clear* and *obvious* share implication; *clear* and *apparent* share violation; *obvious* and *apparent* share inconsistency, reason, and similarity; *obvious* and

*evident* share reluctance and shortcoming; and *apparent* and *evident* share discrepancy and trend.

**Table 4**

*Adverb collocates of clear, obvious, apparent, and evident from COCA*

Rank	Clear			Obvious		
	Adverb Collocate	Frequency	MI Score	Adverb Collocate	Frequency	MI Score
1	Pretty	2,889	3.53	Pretty	1,399	4.06
2	Perfectly	964	4.23	Fairly	420	4.65
3	Abundantly	699	8.27	Painfully	361	7.38
4	Painfully	140	4.44	Immediately	314	3.11
5	Unmistakably	46	5.13	Blatantly	166	7.28
6	Startlingly	23	4.49	Glaringly	135	9.56
7	Patently	22	3.49	Blindingly	97	9.21
8	Starkly	17	3.56	Patently	87	7.04
9	AmPLY	16	3.80	Intuitively	57	6.30
10	Eminently	14	3.16	Plainly	48	4.79
11	Transparently	14	4.15	Ridiculously	21	3.98
12	Frighteningly	12	3.85	Abundantly	21	4.78
13	Unambiguously	10	3.19	Transparently	12	5.50
14	Blindingly	10	4.36	Embarrassingly	11	5.23
15	Bilaterally	10	4.48	Stunningly	7	3.90
16	Excruciatingly	9	3.59	Manifestly	6	4.06
17	Optically	9	4.42	Nakedly	6	5.87
18	Glaringly	7	3.72	Screamingly	6	7.85
19	Resoundingly	7	4.22	Stupidly	6	3.42
20	Indisputably	6	3.03	Blazingly	5	7.15
Rank	Apparent			Evident		
	Adverb Collocate	Frequency	MI Score	Adverb Collocate	Frequency	MI Score
1	Readily	486	7.38	Clearly	247	4.13
2	Immediately	392	4.50	Particularly	233	4.08
3	Increasingly	167	4.09	Especially	199	3.01
4	Painfully	52	5.65	Increasingly	136	4.51
5	Glaringly	26	8.25	Immediately	134	3.66
6	Clinically	22	5.24	Painfully	36	5.83
7	Abundantly	11	4.92	Plainly	33	6.03
8	Tragically	10	4.32	Readily	28	3.97
9	Strikingly	10	4.33	Abundantly	23	6.69
10	Starkly	9	5.28	Starkly	18	7.00
11	Blatantly	5	3.30	AmPLY	13	6.86
12	Shockingly	5	3.91	Clinically	12	5.08
13	Acutely	4	3.15	Strikingly	9	4.89
14	Doubly	4	3.40	Glaringly	7	7.07
15	Outwardly	4	4.12	Vividly	6	3.86

16	Woefully	3	3.24	Powerfully	6	4.22
17	Baldly	3	6.11	Poignantly	6	6.55
18	Blindingly	2	4.68	Blatantly	5	4.01
19	Nakedly	2	5.35	Visibly	4	3.26
20	Disconcertingly	2	5.77	Patently	4	4.38

First, there are three adverb collocates that are shared by every synonym in this study: abundantly, glaringly, and painfully. Next, five adverb collocates are shared by three synonyms: *clear*, *obvious*, and *apparent* share blindingly; *clear*, *obvious*, and *evident* share patently; *clear*, *apparent*, and *evident* share starkly; and *obvious*, *apparent*, and *evident* share blatantly and immediately. Next, eight adverb collocates are shared by 2 synonyms: *clear* and *obvious* share pretty and transparently; *clear* and *evident* share amply; *obvious* and *apparent* share nakedly; *obvious* and *evident* share plainly; and *apparent* and *evident* share readily, clinically, and strikingly. Interestingly, most of the adverb collocates that exist in this study are adverbs of degree, which are used to express the intensity of action or quality.

Despite sharing some collocates, synonyms also collocate with different lexical items, and some synonyms are closer to one another than the other synonyms in the same set. There is no single noun collocate shared by all four synonyms, yet the four synonyms share three adverb collocates. This is, of course, because the four synonyms are not identical. Partington (1998) said that if one synonym is substituted for another, the meaning of the phrase may not change evidently. Nevertheless, there may be one synonym that is more appropriate than the others.

## Semantic Preferences and Prosodies

**Table 5**

*Semantic Preferences for noun collocates of clear*

<b>1. Nature</b>	Sky
<b>2. Material</b>	Acrylic, plastic, vinyl
<b>3. Liquid</b>	Brook, gel, liquid, mucus
<b>4. Surface</b>	Complexion, gloss, polish
<b>5. Sign of Something</b>	Front-runner, implication, indication, signal
<b>6. Communication/Literature</b>	Articulation, channel, message, prose
<b>7. Differentiation</b>	Delineation, demarcation, distinction
<b>8. Thought/Feeling</b>	Conscience, understanding
<b>9. Target Orientation/Instruction</b>	Directive, intent, mandate, objective
<b>10. Action</b>	Sailing, violation

Most of the noun collocates of *clear* are associated with the physical world as the themes that were found included Nature, Material, Liquid, and Surface. Moreover, the theme of Communication/Literature is only found with *clear*. Overall, the majority of noun collocates of *clear* were found to be neutral in terms of semantic prosody. Although **violation** is the only noun collocate of *clear* that directly expresses negative meaning, the concordance lines show that other noun collocates of this synonym also exist in negative environments, such as **indication** from the theme Sign of Something, **delineation** from the theme Differentiation, and **directive** from Target Orientation/Instruction, exemplified as follows:

- 1) be harmful to your body. Belly fats are not attractive, it's a **clear indication** of how unfit someone is.
- 2) Those spaces won't stop men from sexually harassing women, but there are **clear delineations** in place for misconduct that occurs in a traditional workplace.
- 3) It's seen by authorities as an area of study with no **clear directive**, and no tangible results that are applicable to finance,

Furthermore, *clear* was found to be associated with 10 different semantic preferences -- more than the other three synonyms. This supports the findings from meanings that this adjective covers a wider range of meanings.

## Table 6

### *Semantic Preferences for noun collocates of obvious*

<b>1. Information</b>	Answer, choice, conclusion, example, explanation, reason, solution
<b>2. Thought/Feeling</b>	Affection, bias, discomfort, disdain, fallacy, reluctance
<b>3. Action</b>	Omission
<b>4. Downside/Disadvantage</b>	Deficiency, defect, disadvantage, downside, drawback, flaw, shortcoming
<b>5. Sign of Something</b>	Implication
<b>6. Differentiation</b>	Contradiction, inconsistency, similarity
<b>7. Miscellaneous</b>	Beneficiary, manifestation, parallel, ploy, troll

The most noticeable point that arises from analysis of the semantic preferences and prosody of *obvious* is that this adjective is mostly associated



with a negative sense, as a number of nouns that convey negative meanings were found: for instance, discomfort, reluctance, ploy, flaw, disadvantage, deficiency, contradiction, and bias. One interesting pattern was found, in particular. That is, Information is one of the themes that has the most noun collocates of *obvious*. The noun collocates in this theme do not directly express negative meanings; however, the concordance lines show that they occur in the same context with words or phrases that express negative meaning. Consider these examples of reason, example, and conclusion from COCA:

- 1) Dan Didio is **currently destroying this character**.. # Sandman:for **obvious reasons**
- 2) **the problem** that I wanted to see whether they'd spot for themselves. One **obvious example** is the zero-length-array test case:
- 3) to do with those **wars**. They just can perceive reality and draw the most **obvious conclusions**.

**Table 7**

*Semantic Preferences for noun collocates of apparent*

<b>1. Information</b>	Reason, reference, trend
<b>2. Thought/Feeling</b>	Bias, confusion, indifference, willingness
<b>3. Action</b>	Retaliation, suicide, violation
<b>4. Downside/Disadvantage</b>	Absence, inability, lack, weakness
<b>5. Upside/Advantage</b>	Ease, simplicity
<b>6. Differentiation</b>	Anomaly, conflict, contradiction, discrepancy, inconsistency, irony, paradox, similarity
<b>7. Target Orientation/Instruction</b>	Motive
<b>8. Measurement</b>	Diameter, magnitude
<b>9. Miscellaneous</b>	Attempt, brightness, overdose

Differentiation dominates the noun collocates of *apparent* as eight noun collocates appear in Table 7 for this theme. Moreover, among these eight noun collocates, five have negative meanings (anomaly, conflict, contradiction, inconsistency, and irony). The analysis of semantic preference and prosody of *apparent* uncovered that it is similar to *obvious* in that *apparent* is associated with negative meanings. In particular, the theme of Downside/Disadvantage directly expresses negative meaning. A number of negative noun collocates in other themes that are neutral, such as Thought/Feeling (confusion and indifference), and Action (retaliation, suicide, and violation) were also detected.

Some themes, despite being neutral, have members that occur in negative environments as shown in the concordance lines from COCA. Examples include **trend** from Information, **willingness** from Thought/Feeling, **motive** from Target Orientation/Instruction, and **magnitude** from Measurement, exemplified as follows:

- 1) **an increase in the number of dengue outbreaks** occurring in Queensland. To investigate this **apparent trend**
- 2) There's **an extra layer to the problem bugging investors**, too - - an **apparent willingness** among senior Italian politicians to pull Italy out of the euro completely.
- 3) Bowes **had twice tried to destroy Louis's life**. There had never been any **apparent motive** or reason.
- 4) denial within the community 7 can be understood not only as reactions to the increasingly **apparent magnitude of death and illness**

Interestingly, *apparent* was also found to be associated with positive semantic prosody based on its connection to the theme of Upside/Advantage. As a result, it can be inferred that, although *obvious* and *apparent* are associated with negative semantic prosody, the adjective *apparent* is more positive than is its synonym *obvious*.

## Table 8

### *Semantic Preferences for noun collocates of evident*

<b>1. Information</b>	Pattern, trend
<b>2. Thought/Feeling</b>	Bias, distress, empathy, enthusiasm, exhaustion, frustration, irritation, pride, reluctance, sensibility, tension
<b>3. Downside/Disadvantage</b>	Hypocrisy, shortcoming
<b>4. Upside/Advantage</b>	Charisma, dedication, delight, popularity, sincerity
<b>5. Differentiation</b>	Contradiction, differentiation, discrepancy, disparity, divide, variability
<b>6. Power/Force</b>	Influence, superiority
<b>7. Temporal Detail</b>	Continuity
<b>8. Miscellaneous</b>	Socialization

It was found that the theme of Power is found only with *evident*. Similar to *obvious* and *apparent*, a number of noun collocates of this synonym are associated with negative meanings. However, *evident* collocates with a number of nouns like enthusiasm, popularity, delight, empathy, sincerity, charisma, and dedication that express positive sense of meaning. *Evident* shares the theme Upside/Advantage with *apparent*, but has more members than *apparent*. Accordingly, *evident* is considered more positive than *clear*, *obvious*, and *apparent*, in terms of semantic prosody.

The overall findings of the semantic preference and prosody of the noun collocates highlight that Differentiation and Thought/Feeling are shared by every synonym of this study. Next, Information and Downside/Disadvantage are shared by *obvious*, *apparent*, and *evident*. Next, Action is shared by *clear*, *obvious*, and *apparent*. Moreover, Sign of something is shared by *clear* and *obvious*. Lastly, Target Orientation/Instruction is shared by *clear* and *apparent*. These patterns of shared themes of noun collocates confirm synonymy among the four adjectives.

Nevertheless, there are differences. *Clear* is associated with nature, material, liquid, and surface. *Obvious* is involved with the negative sense of meanings. *Apparent* was found to have noun collocates about measurement. *Evident* was found to be associated with power.

## Table 9

### *Semantic Preferences for adverb collocates of clear*

<b>1. Absolute Value</b>	Indisputably, perfectly, resoundingly
<b>2. Extreme Extent</b>	Abundantly, amply, blindingly, eminently, pretty
<b>3. Negative Physical or Mental Condition</b>	Excruciatingly, frighteningly, painfully
<b>4. Surprise</b>	Startlingly
<b>5. Clarity</b>	Glaringly, patently, starkly, transparently, unambiguously, unmistakably
<b>6. Miscellaneous</b>	Bilaterally, optically

For the analysis of semantic preference and prosody of the adverb collocates, it was found that the four synonyms share the theme Extreme Extent as a number of adverbs of degree collocate with the four synonyms. Nevertheless, *clear* has a higher form-of-extent theme, which is Absolute Value. This shows that the shared core meanings which are *easy to see*, *notice*, or *understand* are strongest with *clear*.

**Table 10***Semantic Preferences for adverb collocates of obvious*

<b>1. Extreme Extent</b>	Abundantly, blazingly, blindingly, pretty, screamingly, stunningly
<b>2. Moderate Extent</b>	Fairly
<b>3. Negative Physical or Mental Condition</b>	Embarrassingly, painfully, ridiculously, stupidly
<b>4. Clarity</b>	Blatantly, glaringly, manifestly, nakedly, patently, plainly, transparently
<b>5. Thought</b>	Intuitively
<b>6. Temporal Detail</b>	Immediately

Similar to *clear*, a distinguished theme of Extent was found -- Moderate Extent -- as the adverb **fairly** means more than average but less than very (CALD, 2014). Additionally, a number of adverb collocates of obvious are related to negative sense of meaning.

**Table 11***Semantic Preferences for adverb collocates of apparent*

<b>1. Extreme Extent</b>	Abundantly, acutely, blindingly, doubly, increasingly
<b>2. Negative Physical or Mental Condition</b>	Disconcertingly, painfully, shockingly, tragically, woefully
<b>3. Surprise</b>	Strikingly
<b>4. Clarity</b>	Blatantly, glaringly, nakedly, starkly
<b>5. Temporal Detail</b>	Immediately, readily
<b>6. Medic</b>	Clinically
<b>7. Miscellaneous</b>	Baldly, outwardly

The findings of semantic preference and prosody of adverb collocates of *apparent* are similar to *obvious*, as *apparent* was found to be associated with negative semantic prosody.

**Table 12***Semantic Preferences for adverb collocates of evident*

<b>1. Extreme Extent</b>	Abundantly, amply, increasingly
<b>2. Negative Physical or Mental Condition</b>	Painfully, poignantly

3. Surprise	Strikingly
4. Power/Force	Powerfully
5. Focus	Especially, particularly
6. Clarity	Blatantly, clearly, glaringly, patently, plainly, starkly, visibly, vividly
7. Temporal Detail	Immediately, readily
8. Medic	Clinically

*Evident* shares the theme Power/Force with its noun collocates. This theme distinguishes *evident* from the other three synonyms. Furthermore, this synonym is associated with adverbs of focus as the adverbs **especially** and **particularly** were found.

Overall, *clear* is involved with the highest form that expresses absolute value. *Obvious* and *apparent* are associated with negative meaning. The difference between the two is that *obvious* has one distinguishing theme of extent which is Moderate Extent while *apparent* has only Extreme Extent. *Evident* collocates with focusing adverbs and is involved with Power.

The findings of the present study confirm the analysis from previous studies in many aspects. Despite sharing the core meaning, synonyms have different detailed meanings (Bergdahl, 2009; Chung, 2011). Although this study examines four synonyms which is more than the number investigated in a number of past studies, it still confirms that *clear*, *obvious*, *apparent*, and *evident* share the same core meaning, with each having detailed meanings that are not associated with one or more of the others. Next, each synonym has a different degree of formality (Jarunwaraphan and Mallikamas, 2020; Petcharat & Phoocharoensil, 2017). This study demonstrates that several synonyms are usually found in formal contexts, while some synonyms are used in colloquial English with more frequency than the others. Moreover, corpus-based information helps with identifying the collocates and analyzing the semantic preferences and prosodies (Gu, 2017; Jarunwaraphan & Mallikamas, 2020; Phoocharoensil, 2020). There are collocates that are shared by all four synonyms in this study; however, some collocates usually cooccur with some or several synonyms, but not all. The differences, in terms of collocations, led to the analysis of semantic preference and prosody, which has shown that each synonym is associated with different patterns of themes even while it also shares some themes with some of the other studied synonymous adjectives. These truly helped the researchers of the present study understand how *clear*, *obvious*, *apparent*, and *evident* differ.

## Pedagogical Implications

The present study can be used as a model for teachers to use in teaching their students about loose synonyms, and how to distinguish between them. Teachers may assign the students to look for the shared core meaning and the detailed meanings of each adjective in appropriate dictionaries. Students may be taught how to use the chart function of COCA in order to see the big picture and observe the degree of formality of synonyms. Furthermore, by providing students with noun and adverb collocates, they will be able to understand the synonymy of synonyms, and even analyze the semantic preference and prosody to truly understand how they are different. As a result, they will be able to use words appropriately. Phoocharoensil (2021) said that this is inductive vocabulary learning that will enhance the students' L2 accuracy and proficiency.

Teachers, themselves, can exploit corpora to develop their material development skills as they may draw information from corpora, which is based on authentic English, to create data-driven teaching materials. Timmis (2015) said that authenticity and autonomy are the components of data-driven learning (DDL). The corpus data for DDL may be provided by teachers and evaluated by learners autonomously with the guidance of teachers. Concordance lines and multiple examples that are based on authentic data can be learnt by the students.

Corpus Literacy (CL) and Corpus-based language pedagogy (CBLP) are two key concepts in teacher training. The former is the ability to use corpus data and tools, while the latter is the application of CL as a teaching tool in classroom. These two concepts have often been ignored for several reasons. First, the focus of corpus linguistics research is more on education settings, where learners are already proficient, rather than in school settings with low proficiency students. Second, low-level school learners may find tools such as concordance lines too complicated. Third, teachers have to deal with a lack of access to free and easy-to-use corpus resources, insufficient hardware, and limited computer skills (Ma et al, 2021). An experiment involving CL and CBLP training carried out with student teachers by Ma et al. (2021) showed that CL helped the student teachers to become more skillful with corpora, while CBLP enhanced their teaching. Therefore, awareness, understanding and use of these two concepts should be emphasized more by ELT educators around the world.

## Conclusion

This study shows that *clear*, *obvious*, *apparent*, and *evident* share the same core meanings, but have differences in detailed senses of meaning. *Clear* covers the widest range of meaning, and is usually associated with the physical world. *Obvious* is used when someone wants something so much that other people think it is unsuitable, or in a situation in which people cannot see something, and that fact is surprising. *Apparent* also has its own detailed meanings, which are that something that seems to exist or be true, or that something seems to have some attitude or feeling (though it may not be true). *Evident* does not possess any detailed meanings, but is used in sentences that provide information or evidence that support the meaning.

The distribution across eight genres reveals that the four synonyms can be used in formal contexts as their occurrences in the academic genre are all high, especially *apparent* and *evident*, for which academic is the most frequent genre. Moreover, the ranking across eight genres of these two synonyms (*apparent* and *evident*) are almost the same. Accordingly, *apparent* and *evident* are the most formal synonyms in this study. *Obvious* also has a high level of formality due to its low occurrences in the genres of Spoken and TV/movies, but it is less formal than *apparent* and *evident* because it ranks third for occurrence in the Academic genre. *Clear* is the most informal synonym in this study as its occurrence in the Spoken genre is the highest.

The analysis of noun and adverb collocates highlights that there are certain noun and adverb collocates that are shared by the four adjectives or several adjectives. However, each of *clear*, *obvious*, *apparent*, and *evident* also collocates with nouns and adverbs that the other synonyms do not. This confirms their status as near synonyms. In addition, they are different in terms of the semantic preference and prosody they are associated with. All four synonyms, especially *obvious* and *apparent*, were found to be associated with negative semantic prosodies. Nevertheless, *apparent* has a theme that is positive, which is Upside/Advantage, making it more positive than *obvious*. Moreover, *evident* also has the theme Upside/Advantage, which has more members than *apparent*. As a result, *evident* has the most positive semantic prosody in this set of synonyms. Moreover, the theme of Power is only found with *Evident*. *Clear* is the most distinguished of the four as it has more themes than the other synonymous adjectives, and it is associated with nature, material, liquid, and surface. The four synonyms usually co-occur with adverbs of degree as they share the theme of Extreme Extent and Clarity. However, *clear* has Absolute Value, which is a higher level of extent, while

*obvious* has Moderate Extent, which is a lower form of extent. Lastly, *evident* was found to collocate with adverbs of focus as the theme Focus exists.

There were, of course, limitations that affected the present study. The top-30 nouns and top-20 adverb collocates taken from COCA are based on the MI score. Other statistical tests could be applied as criteria to select collocates, which could affect the study's results. For example, T-score, Z-score, and log-likelihood (Phoocharoensil, 2021). Next, since COCA is the only corpus used in this study, the result is limited to this one corpus. There are other corpora, such as BNC, available to assist the corpus-based study of English synonyms. Moreover, since the criteria employed to distinguish the synonyms in the present study are meanings, distribution across genres, collocations, and semantic preference/prosody, other aspects such as connotation and grammatical pattern could be selected as well.

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