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Aspects of Private *and* Public *in Collocations*

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Introduction

Since the concepts of "private" and "public" are constantly in need of clarification, the paper aims at providing an analysis of the multifaceted dimensions they acquire at the semantic level when part of typical collocations in English.

Far from being a uni-dimensional, rigidly dichotomous pair, at closer examination *private* and *public* prove to be continuous, relative, fluid and contextual concepts, whose meaning lies in how they are interpreted and framed.

Semantically speaking, the best method to explore the polyvalence of the two terms in question is the study of their lexicalized distributions in stereotyped collocations. The table in the Apendix organizes the selected collocations in antonymic pairs.

By examining the collocations in the table, it can be seen that the collocations do not enter symmetrical binary oppositions, but are rather lax and difficult to pair, exhibiting various semantic features, among which the most important seem to be: [±GENERAL], [±ACCESSIBLE], [±OPEN], [±EXPOSED], [±COLLECTIVE], [±SHARED], etc. It is to be remarked that the terms also display some anomalous uses, departing from the prototypical core, but still relevant in constituting their semantic profile.

1. Collocations of PRIVATE

On the whole, as far as the collocations including *private* are concerned, the typical semantic constituents are as follows:

1.1. [+RESTRICTED AVAILABILITY], i.e. used, known or understood only by a particular person or group, this availability being often related to perception by hearing or sight:

(1) They found a private spot where they could talk.
(2) It'll be a bit more private in my office.
(3) You can't enter the club, it's hosting a private party.
(4) He insisted on having a private bathroom for his stay.
(5) What you do in your private life has nothing to do with your boss.
(6) I'd like to talk to you in private, if you don't mind.
(7) They were invited to a private view(ing) 2 weeks before the official release/ opening.

1.2. [-GOVERNMENTAL CONTROL], i.e. controlled or owned by individual people or companies, rather than by the state:

(8) He used his inheritance to build a private hospital.
(9) He chose to invest in private rail companies.

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(10) Whenever he falls ill, he goes private as he doesn't trust the public healthcare system.

(11) Private member (in U.K.) =member of Parliament but not governmental minister

Similarly, one may speak of an extension of this meaning nuance, viz. [-RIGHT TO SELL SHARES / SHARE PROFITS] noticeable in *private company*.

1.3. [+SECRET], i.e. involved in secret activities, or in handling/ uncovering secret information about other people:

(12) Private detective/ eye/ investigator.

1.4. [+PAID], as opposed to free access provided by the government:

(13) Private education, private school, private medicine, private patient

1.5. [-OVERT EXPOSURE] is mainly confined to adverbial instantiations, as in:

(14) Privately, he hoped they would refuse.

(15) They were privately furious about it.

Informally, *private (part)s* also displays the same main semantic constituent, also achieving an euphemistic value.

2. Collocations of PUBLIC

The co-occurrences of *public* are far more varied, displaying the following semantic features, which are to be examined next.

2.1. [-INDIVIDUAL] exhibits top frequency, as expected, occurring in examples such as:

(16) public transport, public library, the city's attractive public spaces

2.2. [+GENERAL AVAILABILITY] is the second most frequent, as in *a public meeting/ inquiry/ hearing*.

(17) Can we go somewhere a little less public?

2.3. [+GOVERNMENTAL CONTROL] as in *public organizations, public defender* alludes to the overlap of the public sphere and the concept of authority and official quality:

(18) The damage was restored using public money.

2.4. [+LARGE SCOPE], i.e. involving, or affecting a large number of individuals, as in *a public nuisance/ hazard, public affairs, public address system* is also quite significant in delineating the semantic profile of *public* as a collocation component:

(19) There has been a public outcry about her imprisonment.

(20) The scheme has a lot of public support.

2.5. [-RESTRICTED ACCESS] evinces another facet of the determiner, as in *public footpath,* or in the following examples:

(21) She keeps her public and private lives very separate.

(22) It is impolite to criticize your colleagues in public.

(23) Her job keeps her in the public eye.

2.5.1. An extension of this semantic component might lead to [-PROTECTED BY COPYRIGHT], as in *public domain* in its adjectival use, meaning available to use by anyone since not under the protection of the law of copyright.

2.5.2. Similarly, [-SECRET] as in *a very public display of unity* resumes the notion of direct availability:

(24) One of the team decided to go public with his concerns about the management.

(25) They insist on keeping their children out of the public eye.

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2.6. The feature [+RIGHT TO SELL SHARES] as in *public company/ corporation* appears last on the frequency scale, bringing into focus a highly specialized semantic feature of the determiner, pertaining to business discourse.
2.7. In addition, it seems that the determiner *public* is almost inherently associated with politics. Thus a public figure is mainly a politician, public affairs are political issues, public service/ office is mostly used to mean high political position, public life refers predominantly to the political domain, although it is used in religion and education as well, public speaking applies to electoral speeches, even if it is defined as just formally addressing large groups of people.
2.8. Other collocations display the feature [+OFFICIAL], such as *public television, public image, public interest, public relations* or *public opinion.* These all appear as intrinsically containing the typical opposition between reality and its perception, although the latter may not necessarily be false.

3. Anomalous uses

The examination of the binary oppositions in the table reveals the duality of most of the semantic features mentioned above, viz. [±INDIVIDUAL], [±GOVERNMENTAL CONTROL], [±AVAILABILITY], [±EXPOSED], and even [±RIGHT TO SELL SHARES]. Still, one may notice the lack of correspondence in the pair *private means / income,* which is money that someone regularly receives but does not work for, for instance from investments, and *public spending*, viz. money paid by the government for projects relating to healthcare, defence, education, etc.

Similarly, there is a linguistic anomaly to be noticed in the pair p*rivate school / education – public school / education.* The previous differences between *private* and *public* are no longer observed, the two becoming interchangeable. So, British English defines *a public school* as a private institution for young people aged 13 to 18, whose parents pay for their education. In American English as well as Romanian, in keeping with the characteristics of the educational system, it would be referred to as a *private school.* On the contrary, in the U.S., a *public school* is a school paid for from taxes and providing free education to children between 5 and 18 (B.E. *state school*). Therefore, the opposition in this particular case should be not *private / public,* but *public /state.*

The same anomalous binary opposition is to be encountered in the case of *public bar*, a section of a pub, which is contrasted not to *private bar*, which is not an acceptable collocation, but to *lounge bar*, the difference being in the price of the drinks served and the quality of the furniture (higher in the latter case).

In keeping with the same idea, a very interesting anomalous case is the collocation *private property of the state.* It seems that 'of the state', viz. 'state-owned' no longer enters a binary opposition with *private*, acquiring a completely different semantic content. Since the specialized law and public administration literature also makes reference to the collocation *public property of the state,* the binary oppositions to be envisaged in this particular instantiation are *private* vs. *public* and *state* vs. *legal or physical person*. From the point of view of the Romanian Constitutional Court, as stipulated in specialized literature, the state is automatically associated with the right of public property, but it is also entitled to the right of private property, just like any other citizens or legal persons in the eyes of civil law. Therefore, private property in its primary sense and the private property of the state refer to the same aspect of civil law, being subject to the same legal regime. Confusing as it may appear at first sight, the collocations in question evince the

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double quality of the state, which may be perceived not only as the supreme public authority, but also as the counterpart of legal or physical persons.

These anomalous uses undoubtedly are instances of the limited compositionality of collocations, i.e. the limited possibility to predict the meaning of the phrase from the meaning of its components. They all introduce a meaning nuance that is somehow different from the conventionalized meaning ascribed to the determiners *private* and *public*, thus rendering their semantic description more complex. It appears that the distribution of the determiners is the primary element according to which their semantic content should be assessed.

Final Remarks

Collocations are a very important part of any language, being seen as part of the conceptual and cultural frame of the community. As far as *private* and *public* are concerned, their semantic profile proves to be rather difficult to establish, as their meaning is multifaceted, highly dependent on the distributional patterns and varies extensively even according to geographical areas.

Distributionally speaking, collocations containing these determiners enter binary oppositions, centered around the features [±GENERAL], [±ACCESSIBLE], [±OPEN], [±EXPOSED], [±COLLECTIVE], [±SHARED], although there is no one-to-one correspondence in some cases.

The semantic features making up the semantic profile of *private* are (in order of frequency): [+RESTRICTED AVAILABILITY], [-GOVERNMENTAL CONTROL], [-RIGHT TO SELL SHARES / SHARE PROFITS], [+SECRET], [+PAID], [-OVERT EXPOSURE].

Similarly, the semantic features characterizing the determiner *public* are (in order of frequency): [-INDIVIDUAL], [+GENERAL AVAILABILITY], [+GOVERNMENTAL CONTROL], [+LARGE SCOPE], [-RESTRICTED ACCESS], [-PROTECTED BY COPYRIGHT], [-SECRET], [+RIGHT TO SELL SHARES].

It is worth mentioning that there are certain anomalous uses which either reverse, or completely disregard the semantic content described; they are to be considered as departures from the norm, evidence of the complexity and limited compositionality of the collocations examined in this paper.

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Appendix

PRIVATE co-occurrences	*VS*	*PUBLIC* co-occurrences
Private life		Public life
Private property		Public property
Private citizen		Public figure
Private company		Public company / corporation
Private detective / eye / investigator		
Private education/ school		Public school
Private enterprise		
Private eye		
Private income / means		Public spending
Private medicine		
Private member		
Private parts		
Private patient		Public health
Private practice		
Private secretary		
Private sector		Public sector/ domain
To go private		To go public; to make public
In private		In public
		In/ out of the public eye
		Public bar
		Public defender
		Public enquiry
		Public expenditure
		Public interest
		Public image
		Public holiday
		Public footpath
		Public nuisance
		Public office
		Public opinion
Private property		Public ownership
		Public relations
		Public servant
		Public service
		Public speaking
		Public television
		Public transport
		Public utility
		Public works

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