



The Use of *Impact* as a Noun and as a Verb in British and American Corpora

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Abstract

This paper shows how the word-class of the word impact is treated in British and American newspaper. The verb usage of impact has grown out of the noun impact, the way many other verbs were converted from nouns to verbs. But the verb usage of this word was not accepted by native speakers for a long time. I have consulted the British National Corpus, the Brown Corpus of Standard American English and the texts of three American newspapers as a corpus of American English: the Miami Herald, the Boston Globe and The Philadelphia Inquirer all of the year 1997. There are very few intransitive examples of impact in the BNC but as a transitive verb impact has been used in the passive voice only. It is not used as a verb in the Brown Corpus, whereas the three newspapers show a full growth of impact as a verb. That is, it occurs in an active sentence with a direct object and in the passive voice as well in the three American newspapers.

Key words: impact, verb usage, noun usage, British English and American English.



1. Introduction

Steven Pinker (2007: 392) says in *The Language Instinct*, “I have estimated that about a fifth of all English verbs were originally nouns”. Conversion of nouns to verbs has been part of English grammar for centuries to form new words. For example, *host*, *chair*, *progress*, *contact* etc. are verbs as well as nouns. *Impact* has also been used mostly as a noun in modern English. The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., records old uses of the same form as a verb, dating back to early 17th century, but its intransitive use with the figurative sense of “to have a (pronounced) effect on” (OED, v, 3b) dates from 1935. Yet, the phrasal form *have an impact on*, which has the same meaning, goes further back to early 19th century. The word in its present denominal sense began first as an intransitive verb, and then as a transitive verb. In this essay I will show how *impact* can function as an intransitive and as a transitive verb by checking the examples of *impact* in written texts. I will compare British and American usage of *impact*.

According to *The American Heritage Book of English Usage* (1996: 106),

Ninety-five percent [of the Usage Panel] disapprove of the use of *impact* as a transitive verb in the sentence *Companies have used disposable techniques that have a potential for impacting our health. It’s unclear why this usage provokes such a strong response, but it can’t be because of novelty.... It may be that its frequent appearance in jargon-riddled remarks of politicians, military officials, and financial analysts has made people suspicious.*

Though the elite practioners of English language disdained *impact* as a verb, Hunston and Francis state that *impact* has the potential of functioning as a transitive as well as an intransitive verb.

2. Database

Huston and Francis (2000: 97) state that it is mostly an American way to use *impact* as a verb and British English tends to follow it. This statement attracted my attention and I wanted to investigate the usage of *impact* in both types of English, because *impact* usually occurs as a noun. It came to my mind that instead of saying ‘The speech had an impact on my life’, is it possible to say ‘The speech impacted my life.’? But Huston and Francis (2000) did not provide any such example of the verb *impact*.



We know that corpus is the best way to consult and to study the traditional or the recent usage of any word. So I intentionally consulted the Brown corpus (1961), the first corpus of Standard American English, compiled by W. N. Francis and H. Kucera, Brown University, Providence, RI. This corpus consists of only one million words of American English texts. The purpose of using the Brown Corpus is to see whether or not the verb usage of impact was common fifty years ago. I have also used the British National Corpus (1994; abbreviated to BNC), a large corpus of British English, consisting of hundred million words of written and spoken text, and the texts of three American newspapers as my corpus of American English: the Miami Herald, the Boston Globe and The Philadelphia Inquirer all of the year 1997.

These corpora provided a lot of actual examples which enhanced my study. I came across 71 occurrences of impact in the Brown Corpus, BNC provided 516 occurrences, the Boston Globe around 2244 occurrences, the Miami Herald 1278 occurrences and The Philadelphia Inquirer 2940 occurrences. In all these corpora the noun form of impact was abundantly used. I have studied all these examples and then divided them in different groups. For example, in what forms did impact occur (impacts, impacted, impacting etc.), what things did precede or succeed impact (impact on, impact upon, the impact, an impact, to impact, will impact etc.). In this way I have systematically arranged all the examples (shown in Table 1 and Table 2). Before confirming what type of a verb impact is, I will show how impact behaves in the corpora.

3. Description of noun impact

3.1. Have an impact on

There are 111 examples of have an impact in BNC. This gives evidence that impact as a noun is still prevailing. In 76 examples of them, on follows impact. It seems that have an impact on is a typical collocation. It should be remembered that this have is almost meaningless and that the major meaning is carried by impact, a noun. For example:

1. Scotland did not necessarily **have an impact on** the domestic affairs of the country as a whole.
2. small but increasing demand for natural foods may also **have an impact on** future thinking about agricultural policy .
3. indicates also, however, that male family members can **have an impact on** non admission where females do not, and that this
4. and Germany is such that all foreign policy questions **have an impact on** it.



5. these fundamental and broad-ranging changes that might **have an impact on** the companies' future outlook.
6. such problems and solutions will obviously **have an impact on** most financial markets and institutions

In these examples the preposition *on* has a close semantic relation with *impact* and so this *on* may arguably be considered to be a part of the collocation, not as introducing a prepositional phrase.

In the following examples the preposition *upon* is just a variant of *on*. There are 6 examples of the preposition *upon* following *have an impact*.

7. size between 1204 and 1259 could not fail to **have an impact upon** such claims to autonomy and independence.
8. his animal subjects) may well be effective copy and **have an impact upon** gullible readers
9. new operations and other medical innovations will all **have an impact upon** the levels of nursing required.
10. political commitments, to ensure that central policies **have an impact upon** all localities.
11. these regional organizations are likely to **have an impact upon** policy implementation.
12. and changes of this kind may in due course **have an impact upon** the electoral system itself.

These examples are not different syntactically and semantically from the previous examples. So it can be said these examples are modifications of *have an impact on*.

The prepositional phrases beginning with *in*, following *have an impact* are adjuncts or adverbials. In these examples the preposition *in* is closely related to the following noun phrase and not to *impact*. There are 3 such examples beginning with *in*. They are:

13. action was always better than none , the project would **have an impact in** several regions
14. that the policy of high interest rates is beginning to **have an impact in** slowing down the across-the-board demand for imports
15. centre in the design function, but that too could only **have an impact in** the longer run.

Basically, *in* limits a place, as in 1, or it restricts an action, as in 2. Example 3 is totally different from these. In the longer run is a modification of the idiomatic phrase *in the long run*, where the preposition *in* is a compulsory component of the idiom, not of the preceding phrase *have an impact*.

There are 11 examples where *have an impact* ends the sentence. This is probably because it does not need to make it clear what is to be influenced in the context. In such cases, the



preposition on is also omitted together with the noun phrase following it. Even if have an impact on can be a collocational and semantic unit, possible omission of on in a shorter version could indicate that syntactically on is somehow related to the following noun phrase.

These examples of a shorter version should basically be counted as having the same pattern as in the examples of have an impact on.

16. Direct interventions in elections motivated by local issues are rare, except in the areas where nationalist parties can **have an impact**.

17. This is not to say that his efforts did not **have an impact**.

18. In addition, institutional factors **have an impact**.

4. Brown Corpus and American newspapers as a corpus

There are 71 occurrences of impact in the Brown Corpus. All the examples are either of nominal or adjectival usage. In the noun usages impact is preceded by the definite article or indefinite article or modified by an adjective.

In all the texts of the Miami Herald of the year 1997, I have come across 1278 instances of impact. In these occurrences impact mostly occur as a noun. In 259 examples of them it is preceded by a definite article, and in 107 examples it is preceded by an indefinite article, in 15 cases of which it occurs in the canonical form of have an impact on, in 28 cases in have an impact and in many cases it is also preceded by a possessive determiner. The noun usage of impact occurs abundantly in the other two newspapers as well. Thus there is no doubt that impact as a noun occurs abundantly in American written text as well as British English.

5. Transitive and intransitive examples

I have accumulated examples of the verb impact from BNC and show how impact can function both as a transitive and an intransitive verb. In English some verbs are always transitive such as, recognize, deserve etc. and some verbs are always intransitive such as, snore, die etc. or linking verbs like sound, become etc. Some can be used as both transitive and intransitive verbs like study, open, speak etc. and some verbs like fire have different senses according as they are intransitive or transitive. Impact belongs to the third group where it has different senses.



Examining the examples of impact in BNC, we observe different senses of the verb. When impact means ‘effect’ it is a transitive verb, because the effect should be on something. But when impact is used as an intransitive verb, the meaning is ‘collide’. Examples of impact as an intransitive verb from BNC:

19. quickly getting off the bus, he ran to where the plane had **impacted** and dragged out the injured pilot who was covered in oil m

20. When the Goblin finally **impacts** his spike drives straight through whatever he lands upon.

21. The crystal missile **impacted** in a skater’s chest, and erupted.

22. the tower beside them as a spray of accelerated star discs **impacted** overhead.

In examples 1 and 2 the verb impact is not followed by an adverbial, but it is implied. In 3 and 4 the verb is followed by an adverbial of place, which makes the situation clear.

6. Impact as a transitive verb in BNC:

23. A homebody’s disgust with the restless owners of fast cars, a temperate man’s contempt for drinkers were **impacted** into this begrudged advice.

24. A stone was **impacted** at the level of the ampulla in five patients.

25. Mrs. McMullen was murdered when soil and vegetation was **impacted** into her mouth and she choked.

26. Precious Metals Division’s performance was **impacted** by precious metal prices which were either flat or in the case of rhodium significantly lower.

27. Samsung’s original plans were **impacted** by HP’s trouble getting floating point units out of Texas

28. show that levels of PCBs in grass and soil in the area **impacted** by the stack plume are indistinguishable from background

29. It is recommended that these facilities are constrained to run while the machine is lightly loaded in order that interactive usage is not **impacted**; eg. overnight running.

30. with the right quantity of Sulphur, and the compound **impacted** — that is to say, if I hit it a pretty fair whack

31. Meconium is the foal’s faecal material that has built up in the rectum before foaling and sometimes gets quite firm and **impacted** and must be passed within the first 24-hours of life.



It should be noticed that in these instances from BNC the transitive verb *impact* appear as a past participle. There are no occurrences in BNC of *impact* directly followed by an object. Thus we can say British English does not support *impact* as a full transitive verb, i.e. on that takes a direct object.

Table 1: Forms and its frequencies of occurrence of *impact* in the BNC

	Impact as a Intransitive verb	Impact as a Transitive verb
BNC	the plane had impacted, impacts his spike, impacted in a skater's chest, impacted overhead.	were impacted into, was impacted at, was impacted by, impacted by, is not impacted, the compound impacted.
	4	9

The figures below each group of forms indicate its frequencies of occurrence.

7. Examples of the transitive *impact* from American newspapers:

Brown Corpus does not provide any example of *impact* as a verb either. This proves that as early as about 1960 *impact* was used as a noun only in American English. But in the three American newspapers a full growth of the verb can be seen. That is, it occurs in various forms, with a modal verb in a verb phrase and taking a direct object, also in the form of a to-infinitive. Table 1 below shows the forms and occurrences of *impact* in the three newspapers.



Table 2: Forms and its frequencies of occurrence of impact in the three American Newspapers

Newspapers	Impact (vt) + O	Bare infinitive	To-infinitive	Phrasal verb	Passive
The Miami Herald	impacts everyone, impacted me, impacting our immigrant.	will impact Haitian, can impact, would impact, may impact.	is going to impact, is to impact, the opportunity to impact.	impact on our lives, impacts on his entire career.	will be impacted by, were definitely impacted.
	15	9	5	4	7
The Boston Globe	impacts the park, impacted the women's pro game, impacting the hard drive.	will impact achievement, may impact a variety.	continue to impact, to impact the community, enough to impact.	impact on the audiences, impacted on more than one quarter.	would be impacted, has been impacted by these.
	9	11	9	3	21
The Philadelphia Inquirer	impacts the lives, impacted his family, impacting the quality.	will impact the township, would impact her, may impact safety operation.	Nil	impact on Medicare, impacts on traffic, impacts upon the youngest.	Morale was further impacted by a process.
	33	17		8	14

The figures below each group of forms indicate its frequencies of occurrence.



7.1. **impact (vt) + O:**

32. The solstice is something that **impacts** everyone's life,
33. how a project **impacts** the park, " she said.
34. It's a decision that **impacts** your lifestyle.
35. we also realize that history **impacts** the lives of people
36. The law **impacts** a lot of people
37. That **impacted** me so much, "Loput said.
38. the Lady Huskies have **impacted** the women's pro game
39. his personal conduct **impacted** his family
40. that means you're **impacting** the quality of instruction
41. uable insight into issues **impacting** our immigrant community
42. My intermodal modem is **impacting** the hard drive in my software

In all of these examples impact has a direct object and the meaning is synonymous to effect. So these are actual instances of transitive verb.

7.2. **Bare Infinitive:**

43. The fear, he predicts, **will impact** Haitian businesses
44. to see how much traffic **will impact** the township, " he said.
45. a single flood event that **will impact** several thousand square mile
46. Those variables probably **will impact** achievement nearly as much
47. The definition **can impact** young minds, says NAACP
48. additional traffic **would impact** nearby farms
49. A rule like this **would impact** her enormously, "McGann said
50. They **may impact** negatively Miami Herald's economy
51. to cost cutting that **may impact** safety operations.

In the examples of bare infinitive, the modal verb will tends to occur more than can, would and may. The instances of will here are conveying the message on the part of the speaker in addition



to certainty that some future happening will be carried out. If something is added or a new rule is implemented what would be the possible outcome, is expressed by would. Can and may also state future possibility.

7.3. To infinitives

52. something that's **going to impact** the child.
53. Division 1-A is not **going to impact** your league.
54. My goal is **to impact** young people who haven't yet
55. jobs have the opportunity **to impact** people's lives on a day-to-day
56. like they can do something **to impact** their disease do better
57. governments will **continue to impact** negatively on Cubans' health
58. vox populi **threatens to impact** both judges and juries.
59. I may be **able to impact** more directly what happens.
60. copy the media but **seem not to impact** his fortunes on Main Street.
61. "It is **designed to impact** black men in a disparate
62. am would be improved enough **to impact** attendance.
63. great to preview talent, **to impact** the community, to know we're
64. ts' presence is more likely **to impact** Boston Latin School because

In the first two examples it occurs as part of a verb phrase where an auxiliary expressing future comes before it. In example 54 to impact young people is the complement of the linking verb and in examples 55 and 56 it functions as a postmodifier. Examples 57 to 61 are in verb phase. In examples 62 and 63 to impact functions as adverbial. In example 64 'is be likely to' is a semi-auxiliary like be going to.

7.4. The phrasal verb in the American newspapers

71. and how that will **impact on** our lives.
72. It **impacts on** his entire career.
73. coming out next summer will **impact on** the audiences.
74. But I'd be surprised if it **impacted on** more than one quarter.
75. estate project that adversely **impacts on** traffic or flooding prob



- 76. as children that seriously **impacts on** them, and they keep going
- 77. on America that would **impact on** Medicare, on education
- 78. allocation of state resources **impacts upon** the youngest

The last example is the variant of the phrasal verb. These phrasal verbs also function as transitive verbs and the noun phrase following each of them is a prepositional object.

7.5. Passive

- 91. industry would be immediately **impacted by** anything
- 92. Future development will be **impacted by** what you do
- 93. there were a lot of people **impacted by** it.
- 94. Greek Community has been **impacted by** these recent events.
- 94. Morale was further **impacted by** a process
- 95. Some pools would be **impacted** only on the highest tides,
- 96. The kids were definitely **impacted**.

It can be noticed that these examples are in past participle form. Example 95 and 96 are without the subject of the object. This can be a stylistic way. The object is clearly mentioned in the context so it is not important to point it out again. In example 95 it is followed by an adverbial of place. The two adverbials immediately, definitely and further in examples 91, 94 and 96 respectively express speaker's attitude.

8. Impact in a to-infinitive form in BNC

Impact on is found in an infinitive form in a few examples where another verb precedes it. Here are 6 such examples from BNC:

- 65. form-filling and planning of a kind that **fails to impact on** the quality of the classroom.
- 66. Arson and fraud-related claims **continue to impact on** the account.
- 67. underlying improvement as successful rating action **begins to impact on** Commercial as well as Personal lines.
- 68. TOP is **beginning to impact on** how things are done throughout the Station
- 69. towards the growth of a total quality culture it **seeks to impact on** all aspects of Scottish life, encompassing corporate



70. then gives us this spiral of improvement which is **bound to impact on** everything that we do.

Example 70 is different from the other five, since *be bound to* is auxiliary-like, having a modal sense like *must*, and obviously *is bound to impact on* makes a verb phrase. However, in the other five the infinitive may be interpreted as the object of the preceding predicators, but significantly the four verbs *begin*, *continue*, *fail*, and *seek* are verbs that together with the following *to*-infinitive make a collocational status called 'verb phrase' by Hunston and Francis (2000: 169-75). They claim that there are two types of such verb relationship. The four verbs act on the second verb (here, *impact on*) and they together contribute to the meaning.

9. The phrasal verb *impact on* in BNC

There are 66 examples of the phrasal verb *impact on* in BNC. A noun phrase follows it and functions as its prepositional object:

79. the negative side in this tradition, for example how it **impacts on** women.

80. the bombing of houses, bridges and roads inevitably **impacts on** our ability to find funds elsewhere.

81. and industry, the mechanisms by which science **impacts on** technology and the development dynamics of

82. The cost of introducing new products at Inex Visions also **impacted on** margins and the profits from that side were

83. family functioning and the abilities of welfare services **to impact on** this.

10. *Impact on* interrupted

There are six examples of the phrasal verb in BNC where an element severs it. The intervening elements are mostly adverbs and come between *impact* and the prepositional particle. For example:

84. it is seen that international and national processes have **impacted differentially on** different kinds of sub regions.

85. the process in both branches of the profession **impacts adversely on** women and ethnic minorities



86. incomes have risen throughout the world and that **impacts both on** the demand for agricultural products and also the demand for manufactured products ...

87. Now Elsevier also **impacted, of course, materially on** the balance sheet as the next

88. Each of these areas **impacts directly or indirectly on** the structures and regulations

89. Obviously the death of my father **impacted greatly upon** my childhood years

The last example with upon, not on, is a variant of the canonical form impact on. The others than both and of course are adverbs of manner. Of course is used for an emphasis and it expresses speaker's attitudes. Both ... and are correlatives.

There is only one example in the Boston Globe where the phrasal verb is interrupted by an adverb:

90. Governments will continue to **impact negatively on** Cubans' health

There are 7 adverbs that came between impact and on in BNC but in the Boston Globe a new adverb negatively appears. It is also an adverb of manner. So it can be said that different adverbs of manner collocates with impact. Probably this structure is more emphatic than an adverb preceding the phrasal verb to express something.

11. Conclusion

According to the Usage Panel for The American Heritage Book of English Usage and BNC the transitive impact is not generally accepted, there is no single example of the verb usage even in the Brown Corpus texts of 1960s American English but Huston and Francis (2000: 97) present a plausible process by which this word has changed from the phrasal verb impact on to "an ordinary transitive verb." Although there are a few cases in BNC where impact occurs as an intransitive verb, most of the verb usages of impact as seen in the same corpus are in the form of impact on, from which, it may be supposed, it is a step toward impact turning into a transitive verb. However, the attested examples of impact as a transitive verb are in the form of Ven in BNC. So far as BNC is concerned, we do not see a full growth of the transitive impact, but the three American newspapers of the year 1997 show a maturity of impact as a transitive verb. Thus Huston and Francis' (2000: 97) statement that it is an American way to use impact as a verb and British English tends to follow it, may be justified.



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