

The Dictionary, the BNC, and Lexical Features

The Dictionary

How about the lexical ‘rate of population’? Is it logical? This lexical has two elements, ‘rate’ and ‘population,’ and each element has its own features. Let’s look up rate’s features in the *Collins* dictionary.

rate, rates, rating, rated. The **rate** at which something happens is the speed at which it happens over a period of time.

We can find that ‘rate’ has four features:

1. the speed...
2. ...at which something...
3. ...happens
4. ...over a period of time

Can population have a rate? Let’s try to apply the features for ‘rate’ to the other element in the lexical, ‘population.’

Feature 1: Does a population have a speed?

No.

Feature 2: Is population a thing?

It certainly is.

Feature 3: Can population happen?

It can’t (or at least doesn’t) in English. Population doesn’t happen, it grows or decreases or explodes or...

Feature 4: Does a population exist over a period of time?

Certainly. Even though it changes, the same basic populations continues.

If we have to answer “no” to any one feature, we have to give up on that lexical. Here, because of Features 1 and 3, we have to give up on ‘rate of population’—it’s not a good lexical. As an alternative to this mismatch, how about “the rate of population decrease? Can a decrease have a rate? Test it with the four features that we used to test “population.”

Get into the habit of identifying and testing every feature in the dictionary entry, and seeing if the features of both words in the lexical work together as good partners.

The British National Library Corpus (“the BNC”)

If you aren’t certain about the acceptability of a lexical that you want to use, look up your candidate in the British National Library Corpus (“the BNC”), which is linked in E>G, under Writing. If you can’t find it there, you probably shouldn’t use that lexical. Here is a sampling of what your teacher found when he checked the BNC for ‘rate of population.’ If you look at the corpus sentences carefully, you will see that ‘rate of population’ is used, but *always* with a word related to the feature *speed* (one of the features of ‘rate,’ which is feature #1, above).

Results of your search

Your query was: rate of population

ACH 13 The contemporary concern was so great that a Royal Commission on Population was set up in 1944 to examine the problem of Britain's declining rate of population growth.

ACH 35 Only four factors can determine the rate of population growth --; migration, the age of marriage, death rates and birth rates.

AMG 735 As individuals reproduce these resources are necessarily depleted and the relation between the speed of their renewal and the rate of population growth governs the numbers of individuals that can live there.

AN3 326 This is very much a Third World phenomenon for, throughout these areas, the rate of population increase is considerably higher than in the industrialised world.

AN3 327 For the period from 1975-82, the annual rate of population increase was 2.9 for Africa, 1.4 for East Asia, 2.2 for South Asia, 1.5 for Oceania and 2.5 for Latin America.

AN3 330 Apart from West Africa, with a rate of 3.1, Middle America is the sub-region with the highest annual rate of population increase (3.0) in the world (Demographic Yearbook 1982).

B12 1382 The increase in secondary school enrolments in DET schools has far outstripped the rate of population increase.

CM9 160 On the other hand, small temples like the one at Gournia and those towns, like palaikastro, which apparently managed without temples, may have organized the agricultural production of their own estates near by on a scale that was commensurate with their size and rate of population growth.

CR8 883 The Taiwanese government said last week that the rate of population growth this year would dip below 1% for the first time, to 0.95%, and forecast zero growth by 2035.

CRM 11334 These formulae involve the rate of population growth; this is because the value of an offspring depends on the size of the population into which it is born.

EDK 879 London's rate of population loss in the 1970s was virtually the same as the average for the next five cities (Birmingham, Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester, and Newcastle), so the relative gap between them changed little.

EDK 924 In non-metropolitan districts as a whole the rate of population growth in the first years of the 1980s was less than half what it had been a decade earlier, though again most of the fall preceded 1978.

EE2 1486 The rate of growth of agricultural output in the Meiji period is subject to considerable dispute, but it is probable that a rate of around 1.8 per cent annual growth in output was maintained through to the early 1900s at least, far outstripping the rate of population growth in the same period.

EE9 492 Expenditure rose by 40 per cent between 1850 and 1870, faster than the rate of population growth.