A CONFRONTATION OF *SAY, SPEAK, TALK, TELL* WITH POSSIBLE GERMAN COUNTERPARTS

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1.0 Introduction

It can be assumed that languages abound in verbs with speech act reference as part of their lexeme structure; this assumption can be stated as a fact at least for the two languages under consideration, English and German. When the abundance can be stated on the grounds of an intuitive pre-classification, two essential questions remain yet to be answered: what semantic features do these verbs, or more preciseiy, their lexeme structures have in common, and with respect to what features or feature classes do they differ?

These four verbs have been chosen for at least four reasons: Firstly, even under conditions of pre-classification they can definitely be called verbs of saying, i.e. speech act reference can be recognized as part of their lexeme structure. Secondly, they can help to demonstrate a classification system of semantic features which can possibly, at least to some degree, account for the lexeme structure of verbs with speech act reference. Thirdly, although a proposed system of this sort can explain a fairly wide range of semantic conditions of verbs with speech act reference, some aspects of the lexeme structure of just these four verbs are so subtle that for this reason they deserve special attention and demonstration. Fourthly, on the grounds of their seeming similarity, semantic and otherwise, to a group of German verbs of saying, they lend themselves to a confrontative analysis which will either confirm or deny these supposed similarities.

Rather than immediately to compare the lexeme structures of the verbs of one language with those of some verbs of the other language, each verb will be described in terms of the classification system mentioned before. This system is supposed to represent a semantic matrix of speech act reference, identifying the constant and the variables of meaning.

2.0 Feature Classification for Verbs of Speech Act Reference

2.1 Syntagmatic Aspects of the Classification

Speech act reference has to be viewed under lexical as well as under syntactic aspects — this consideration is of general importance for the analysis. The focus of attention is on the verbs; their lexeme structure will be described in terms of a syntagmatic arrangement that also holds for the verbs syntactic expansion into sentences.

2.2 Semantic Representation of Speech Act Reference

The syntagmatic formula *A' says' x' to B'* is considered to represent the basic semantic conditions of speech act reference. Its elements and their arrangement are derived from *A says x to B* as the notation for the actual speech act. The actual speech act is a linguistic event in itself, in this case it has as its linguistic object another speech act, namely *A' says' x' to B'*. Accordingly, *A' says' x' to B'* is seen as 'embedded' in the frame *A says x to B*, occupying the position *x* as the realization of the actual speech act. By means of *say* the position *x* is a 'function' of the *speaker A*, which here means that *A' says' x' to B'* is a 'function' of the *speaker A*. His reference not only depends on conditions of the speech act referred to, but also on factors which are determined by his role, as e.g. interpretation of and attitude towards the speech act referred to, or selection of certain of its aspects.

This dependence on conditions of the actual speech act and the relation to the formula *A says x to B* understood, *A' says' x' to B'* as the syntagmatic formula for the semantic representation of speech act reference is the basis for the analysis and description of verbs with speech act reference and their lexeme structure.

In the positions *A'* and *B'* the formula identifies the two personal roles involved, namely the speaker of the speech act referred to and the (intended) hearer, which themselves are attached to and determined by the predicate *say'* of this syntagma. Another role determined by *say'* is *x'*, the speech event referred to, or — to put it differently — the verbal part of this speech act. 'Verbal part' is here preferred to a term like 'communication' for at least two reasons. Although communication very often will be implied in a speech act, it need not necessarily be so; on the other hand, communication need not be verbal. The piece of language code transmitted from *A'* to *B'* is then *x'*, and *say'* can be defined as the process of transmission or rather its reference.

The formula hinges on its predicate *say'*; it contains and determines the syntagmatic positions in *A' says' x' to B'* together with their semantic relations and implications. With its positions and their relations identified, the formula functions as the syntagmatic matrix of meaning. It immediately represents the 'constant of meaning' of verbs denoting speech act reference, i.e. the

class criterion of their lexeme structure. Differences of meaning can be ascribed to its individual positions, *A'*, *B'*, *say'*, *x'*, that is, features specifically associated with them; these positions accordingly constitute the 'variables of meaning', which serve to set up feature classes accounting for further differentiation within the lexeme structures.

The feature class *variable say'* subsumes those verbs whose lexeme structure is characterized by aspects of the process of verbal transmission, as e.g. *shout*; the feature class *variable x'* contains those verbs whose lexeme structure reflects aspects of the piece of language code transmitted, as e.g. *confess*; and the feature classes *variable A'* and *variable B'*, respectively, comprise those verbs whose lexeme structure is to some degree conditioned by certain traits of these roles, as e.g. *grant* (*A'*) and *announce* (*B'*). Each of the feature classes serves for further differentiation.

The syntagmatic matrix of meaning immediately represents the reference to a single speech act only, and it immediately applies to verbs only. Other terms of speech act reference, as e.g. *statement*, *reportedly*, are seen as derived from sentences containing a verb of speech act reference as their predicate.

The reference to a single speech act has to be differentiated from the reference to a correlated speech act, as this distinction can be of relevance for the lexeme structure of certain verbs, as e.g. *answer*, *deny*. Yet another semantic condition that cannot immediately be ascribed to any of the 'variables of meaning' and their feature classes is accounted for within the range of the definition of *A' says' x' to B'* as the 'function' of the *speaker A*; among other aspects of this 'function' it may consist in his evaluation of the speech act referred to, and this evaluation may be negative, as e.g. with *preachify* or *sermonize*. These instances, however, are also covered by the matrix of meaning and its relation to the actual speech act.

2.3 Semantic Representation of Verb and Sentence

It is not only assumed that the 'constant of meaning' together with the differentiating features associated with the 'variables of meaning' represent the individual lexeme structure; but it is furthermore supposed that they also represent the syntax of the verb and its semantic conditions. The semantic representation of the verb and that of its sentence coincide, as the verb and its lexeme structure determine the sentence and its semantic representation. When this coincidence is violated by manipulating the semantic representation of the sentence, its interpretation becomes contradictory, as e.g. in:

(1a) *He shouted in a low voice: "Come here!".

(2a) *He confessed that he was not guilty.

The lexeme structures of *shout* and *confess* share the 'constant of meaning', they differ with respect to the variables that account for their additional

semantic features. As for *shout*, these features can be associated with an aspect of the variable *say'*, more precisely, with a subclass of the type *voice (manner/volume)*. A category like this is of no relevance for any other of the feature classes.

The lexeme structure of *confess*, on the other hand, is further determined by an aspect of the variable *x'*, an aspect which, more precisely, can be found in a subclass like *interpretation x'*, that is based on the meaning content of *x'*. When the *speaker A* interprets the meaning content in terms of an evaluative category of the type 'something concerning *A'* is negative for *A'/A'* has done sth. negative', *confess*, whose lexeme structure is seen as determined in this way, is one of the verbs to convey this type of interpretive meaning.

When the semantic representation of *x'* is integrated into the lexeme structure, as e.g. with *confess*, or when *x'* is considered in terms of its meaning content or its syntax, as e.g. with *shout*, *x'* will be taken account of as=$\underline{x}'_S$.

According to the membership of *shout* and *confess* in two different subclasses, namely *variable say'* and *variable x'*, respectively, the deviance of (1a) and (2a) is due to a violation of the respective categories in the semantic representation of these sentences. The semantic categories of the sentence adjusted to those of the verb, as shown in (1b) and (2b), the sentence is no longer contradictory:

(1b) He shouted (across the street): "Come here!".

(2b) He confessed that he was guilty.

Semantic features not found in the respective feature classes, can be added to the sentence without interfering with its semantic representation, that is, its coincidence with that of the verb. Thus, *shout* is neutral with respect to the variable *x'*; and *vice versa*, the semantic representation of *confess* is in no way conditioned by features of the variable *say'*:

(1c) He shouted that he was not guilty.

(1d) He shouted that he was guilty.

(2c) He confessed in a low voice that he was guilty.

(2d) He confessed loud and clear that he was guilty.

Although these 'additional' features are not determined by the feature class of the verb, that is, the specific variable, they certainly must not contradict the 'constant of meaning', the inherent part of the lexeme structure of *shout* as well as *confess*.

3.0 An Attempt at Classifying *say*, *speak*, *talk* and *tell*

3.1 Conditions of Classification within this Group

Whereas *shout* and *confess* can be assigned to their respective feature classes on fairly clear grounds, some of the four English verbs under consideration, together with possible lexical counterparts in German, show a certain

variety of semantic features that at least in some cases asks for a corresponding variety of feature classes and subclasses which a single verb may have to be assigned to. In a case like this the verb has different lexeme structures, accounting for different semantic representations. On the other hand, two different verbs can — at least partly — share semantic features and may even be interchangeable; mere surface substitutions can, however, prompt different interpretations.

The proximity of variety and similarity then is a criterion for grouping these four English verbs together; another closely related criterion that to some degree may possibly account for their 'similarity' is the predominance of the 'constant of meaning' in some of these verbs and their lexeme structures. The verbs or those of their lexeme structures predominantly characterized by the 'constant of meaning' can be void of or nearly void of additional semantic features; this vacuum may permit then a variety, a restricted variety, of semantic representations within the range of this predominance.

Predominance of the 'constant of meaning' over the differentiating 'variables of meaning' has to be recognized as a semantic factor, which can cause semantic differentiation to be unstable and less clear cut. Still, semantic differentiation can be observed in these instances, too, and on these grounds they will be classified within the semantic feature system. Differentiating factors will be found in the feature classes *variable say'*, *variable x'*, *variable B'*, and in the distinction between single and correlated speech act reference.

3.2 Some Lexical Counterparts in German

Possible lexical counterparts of *say*, *speak*, *talk*, *tell* in German are *sagen*, *reden*, *sprechen*, *erzählen*, *sich unterhalten*, though they do not necessarily coincide in semantic range. The demonstration concentrates on the English verbs and their lexeme structures; they will be confronted with the German lexemes in particular instances of equivalence or contrast.

3.3 *Say*

Say is one of those verbs whose lexeme structure is dominated by the 'constant of meaning'; on the other hand its lexeme structure is thought to contain the bare minimum of features essential for speech act reference, so that this lexeme has been chosen to represent the semantic class. *Say* is grouped within the feature class *variable say'*, constituting a subclass of its own, *presentation x'*. This is the essential, if not the only differentiating feature, setting *say* apart even from those verbs that among other more specific features can have this feature as well. *Say* is neutral with respect to *x'*, that is, *x'* has no share in the lexeme structure of *say*. The different surface realizations

of $\underline{x}'$, as e.g. direct quotation or embedding by *that*+x'_S will not be taken account of.

Say will be viewed briefly under the following aspects: feature specification of A'; specification of *say* with respect to the 'channel' of *presentation* x' as either [+oral] or [+written]; the category of *voice* (*passive*).

A' can in general be characterized as [+person] or [+institution], when A' [+institution] represents a group of persons. Although the inherent specification for 'channel' is [+oral], *say* can be neutral with respect to 'channel', that is, it can refer to *presentation* x', when this presentation makes use of the 'channel' [+written]. In these cases the present tense may be preferred.

(3) He said: "Pollution of the air is a threat to mankind".

(4) The Board of Directors said: "Pollution of the air is a threat to mankind".

(5) The author says: "Pollution of the air is a threat to mankind".

The subject position can also be occupied by a noun (or its pronoun) denoting a written product of *presentation* x'; this noun can in free variation also occur in the prepositional phrase *in*+NP, whereby A' then occupies the subject position:

(6a) Her brochure says: "Pollution of the air is a threat to mankind".

(6b) She says in her brochure: "Pollution of the air is a threat to mankind".

Still another class of nouns can occupy the subject position, but neither is free variation possible with the prepositional phrase *in*+NP, nor can A' occupy the subject position:

(7a) Statistics say that pollution of the air is a threat to mankind.

(7b) *He says in the statistics that pollution of the air is a threat to mankind.

Noun phrases like *statistics, symbolic representation, list,* do not refer to a speech act and *presentation* x'; they rather denote the presentation of some non-linguistic code. In this case *say* does not refer to a speech act, but to this type of presentation and its interpretation by the *speaker* A.

Two types of passive-constructions permit that A' need not be identified, though he may be:

(8a) He is said to be quiet.
(Jespersen 1933:343)

(8b) He is said by his teacher to be quiet.

(8c) It is said that he is quiet.

(8a) - (8c) are assumed to be reached at through several stages of derivation or transformation, which have as their starting-point the active-syntagma of *say*: *A' says x' to B'*, with a special device operating on x', that is, its syntagma, too. For the active version of (8a) and (8c) cf. (8d):

(8d) They say that he is quiet.

A' in (8d) is anonymous. A' can be retained in the passive version, cf. (8b), possibly only when this position has been, or rather can be identified.

(8a) and (8c) are seen as further derived from a passive—syntagma *x' is said (by A')*, which can result in two different surface structures. In (8c) is embedded as the subject of the passive sentence, represented by the anticipatory pronoun *it*: "*It* is said that x'_S". In (8a), however, it is not x'_S that occupies the subject position, but NP as the (personal) subject of x'_S; in this case the verb phrase of x_S is embedded as an infinitive phrase: "x—[+person] is said to+infinitive phrase (x'_S)". Jespersen (1933:343) recognizes the position here identified as x'_S and x'_S as "'split subject'", thus accounting for the embedding of x_S into a construction "in which the subject plus an infinitive is in itself the subject of the main verb".

As far as the possible German counterpart is concerned, *sagen* shares the semantic feature specification *presentation* $\underline{x}'$ with *say*, although in contrast to *say* it is not restricted to this subclass within the feature class *variable say'*, as can be seen later. With respect to 'channel', *sagen* before all has the specification [+oral], but may, however, also be neutral, as can be *say*; cf. (3) - (5). Whereas (6bb) can be seen as a German counterpart for (6b), a paraphrase relation as that between (6a) and (6b) does not hold for *sagen*, cf. (6aa) and (6bb):

(6aa) *Ihre Broschüre sagt: "Die Luftverschmutzung bedroht die Menschheit".

(6bb) Sie sagt in ihrer Broschüre: "Die Luftverschmutzung bedroht die Menschheit".

In the case where A' of *sagen* is not identified, either the passive is found with x' as its subject, represented by the 'anticipatory' pronoun *es*, cf. (8cc) as a possible equivalent for (8c), or the indefinite pronoun *man* refers in the active construction to A' anonymous, cf. (8dd) and the corresponding English construction—type (8d). With A' unidentified, in German another lexeme can be substituted for *sagen*, namely *erzählen* or *sich erzählen*, respectively, cf. (9a) and (9b).

(8cc) Es wird gesagt, daß er ruhig ist.

(9a) Es wird erzählt, daß er ruhig ist.

(8dd) Man sagt, daß er ruhig ist.

(9b) Man erzählt sich, daß er ruhig ist.

In German there is no equivalence for the construction-type (8a) and (8b), respectively.

3.4 *Speak* and *Talk*

Speak and *talk*, too, definitely belong to those verbs whose lexeme structure is predominated by the 'constant of meaning'; their lexeme structure thus

allows for a certain variety of more or less unstable features. Though far from being synonymous, *speak* and *talk* share membership in a subclass of the feature class *variable say'*, whose differentiating feature is *verbal activity*. This feature is of principal relevance for the two verbs, in that it also dominates their further specifications; on the other hand, it also permits other features to determine them. Besides, *verbal activity* can in itself, that is, within this subclass, identify different features.

This shared membership implied, *speak* can, besides, be assigned to another subclass of the feature class *variable say'*, namely *faculty*; it can also be identified as a member of the feature class *variable B'*, with *B'* specified as [+public]. *Talk* in *talk to sb.* can be interpreted as referring to a correlated speech act.

By reason of this unstability, *speak* and *talk* are not described in terms of a feature analysis; instead they are confronted in some cases, this confrontation demonstrating either the deviance of one of two sentences confronted or a difference in sentence interpretation:

(10a) He can speak English.
(10b) *He can talk English.
(11a) He speaks English.
(11b) ≠He talks English.
(12a) He spoke distinctly.
(12b) *He talked distinctly.
(13a) He is a good speaker.
(13b) ≠He is a good talker.
(14a) He spoke to his friend.
(14b) ≠He talked to his friend.

For *speak* in at least (10a) and (12a) the counterpart is *sprechen*, cf. (10aa) and (12aa); *speak/sprechen* in (10a) and (10aa) respectively, imply *faculty*, whereas *speak/sprechen* in (12a) and (12aa) respectively, refer to an aspect of *verbal activity*, that of articulation.

(10aa) Er kann Englisch sprechen.
(12aa) Er sprach deutlich.

The difference in the sentence interpretation of (11a) and (11b) is due to the different lexemes *speak* and *talk*, with *speak* here referring to *faculty*, and talk to verbal activity. In either case the counterpart may be *sprechen*, cf. (11aa) and (11bb); in (11bb) *reden* may be substituted for *sprechen*:

(11aa) Er spricht Englisch.
(11bb) Er spricht / redet Englisch.

Speaker in (13a) is derived from *speak* with the specification of *B'* as [+public]; its counterpart with reference to this feature specification is *reden* or *Redner*, respectively, cf. (13aa). The positive evaluation, cf. *good*, in (13a) refers to the quality of the speech act specified with respect to *B'* [+public]; in (13b), however, it implies quantity with reference to mere *verbal activity*.

Reden also covers this feature specification, collocating here with an adverb of quantity, cf. (13bb).

(13aa) Er ist ein guter Redner.
(13bb) Er redet viel.

A counterpart of the correlated speech act reference in (14b) is *sich unterhalten*, cf. (14bb). The speech act situation in (14a) is different; here *reden* and *sprechen* might be interchangeable within the *verbal activity*, with *A'* being the active part, cf. (14aa).

(14aa) Er redete / sprach mit seinem Freund.
(14bb) Er unterhielt sich mit seinem Freund.

3.5 *Tell*

According to different features involved, for *tell*, too ,there can be stated differences in its lexeme structure. In this case, however, the different features do not overlap, thus blurring the boundaries of class membership. Instead, they can be isolated rather clearly, accounting for the membership of *tell* in the two subclasses *verbal activity* and *information B'* of the feature class *variable say'* and a subclass of the feature class *variable x'*, that can be identified as *qualification x'*: *A' imperative towards B'*.

Without defining differentiation within the subclass *verbal activity* any further, *tell* in (15a) is ascribed to this subclass, or rather this subclass accounts for *tell*:

(15a) She told the children a fairy tale.

Another characteristic feature of *tell*, constituting one of its lexeme structures, is that it sets up a specific relation between *A'* and *B'*, namely *information B'*. This feature is classified within the feature class *variable say'* on the grounds that *x'*, carrying the information, is unconditioned in other respects, a criterion which *tell* of this specification shares with *say*. *Say*, however, is unrestricted in terms of *information B'*, whereas *tell* is determined by this feature:

(16a) After they had been watching the intersection for several minutes, he said to them: "Traffic is rather heavy".
(16b) *After they had been watching the intersection for several minutes, he told them: "Traffic is rather heavy".

Thus, under the circumstances described in (16a) and (16b), *tell* is — in contrast to *say* — not acceptable, as x'_S does not contain any (new) information for *B'*. With respect to this feature the situation is reversed in (17a) and (17b); accordingly *tell* is the appropriate term to refer to the conveyance of x'_S:

(17a) As they did not know it yet, he told them that he had been offered the job.
(17b) +As they did not know it yet, he said to them that he had been offerred the job.

For *tell* denoting speech act reference, the meaning content of x_s', representing *information B'*, can either be retained or deleted in the surface structure. In case x_s is retained, it can be represented by a quotation of x'_s, an embedding of x'_s by means of *that*, or by the *pro*-form *so*. In case the meaning content of x'_s is deleted, x'_s can be represented by NP, PP, or S_{Wh}-. In (18a) x'_s is retained, whereas in (18b) it is deleted:

(18a) He told them that he had arrived at 10 p.m.

(18b) He told them when he had arrived.

Tell of this specification not only refers to a speech act; it can be used with any noun as its subject that can serve as a source of information and is interpreted in this way:

(19a) His face told them that he was annoyed.

The third category for the lexeme structure of *tell* has been identified as *qualification x': A' imperative towards B'*. If *x'* is qualified in this way by the *speaker A'*, x'_s is embedded obligatorily as an infinitive phrase. The subject of x'_s is *B'*, being the direct object of *tell*; cf. (20a). The passive version is (20b), with *B'* as its subject; *A'* is deleted.

(20a) He tells him to be quiet.

(20b) He is told to be quiet.

(Jespersen 1933: 343)

There is no single lexical equivalent in German that covers these different feature specifications of *tell*.

With reference to *verbal activity*, cf. (15a), *erzählen* would be the equivalent verb:

(15aa) Sie erzählte den Kindern ein Märchen.

In contrast to *say* that is seen as restricted to the subclass *presentation x'*, the lexeme structure of *sagen*, that can also be specified by this feature, is characterized by further differentiation. One of these specifications implies *information B'*.

These two different semantic specifications of *sagen* are matched by different construction-types. Whereas *sagen*+prepositional phrase (*to B'*) is to be interpreted as *presentation x'*, cf. (16aa), *sagen*+dative object (*B'*) refers to *information B'*, cf. (17aa).

(16aa) Nachdem sie die Straßenkreuzung mehrere Minuten beobachtet hatten, sagte er zu ihnen: "Es herrscht ziemlich dichter Verkehr".

(16bb) *Nachdem sie die Straßenkreuzung mehrere Minuten beobachtet hatten, sagte er ihnen: "Es herrscht ziemlich dichter Verkehr".

As the situation stated in x_s' is obvious, the feature *information B'*, which is found in the construction *sagen*+dative object of (16bb), interferes with the interpretation of (16bb); cf. also (16b).

Reference to *B'* in the dative case, on the other hand, seems to be obligatory for a feature specificytion of *sagen* as *information B'*, cf. (17aa):

(17aa) Da sie es noch nicht wußten, sagte er ihnen, daß ihm die Stelle angeboten worden war.

(17bb)*Da sie es noch nicht wußten, sagte er zu ihnen, daß ihm die Stelle angeboten worden war.

Also with *sagen*, the meaning content of *x'*S can be either retained, cf. (18aa), or deleted, cf. (18bb):

(18aa) Er sagte ihnen, dass er um 10 Uhr angekommen war.

(18bb) Er sagte ihnen, wann er angekommen war.

Sagen can also be used in order to refer to any source of information:

(19aa) Sein Gesicht sagte ihnen, daß er ärgerlich war.

In instances (17aa) - (19aa) *erzählen* might be used, too, though *sagen* is considered to represent the feature *information B'* more distinctly.

Sagen can also be used to convey a concept like *qualification x': A' imperative towards B'*; it is, however, not specified with respect to this feature so that additionally the modal verb *sollen* is used, here implying obligation; cf. (20aa). With *sagen*, x'_s is embedded by means of *that*. In the passive version, cf. (20bb), the subject is x'_s:

(20aa) Er sagt ihm, daß er ruhig sein soll.

(20bb) Ihm wird gesagt, daß er ruhig sein soll.

4. Conclusion.

Say, speak, talk and *tell* have at least partly been described in terms of the syntagmatic matrix of meaning. It has become obvious, too, that especially those verbs whose lexeme structure is predominated by the constant of meaning ask for a more refined system of semantic description. Besides being a linguistic goal in itself, confrontative analysis can help to demonstrate the categories of analysis.

REFERENCES

Jespersen, O. 1933. *Essentials of English grammar*. London: Allen and Unwin.