

SPEAK AND TALK:
A VINDICATION OF SYNTACTIC DEEP STRUCTURE

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In this paper I show the following. The English verbs *speak* and *talk* are synonymous. They differ, however, in their selection restrictions. Therefore the claim that all selection restrictions are semantically based is false. At least some selection restrictions must be represented in the syntactic component of a grammar.

For two expressions (lexical items, phrases, sentences) to be synonymous, they must express the same sense. Both *speak* and *talk*, I claim, express the sense given in (1).

(1) "emit linguistic sounds"

That is, *speak* and *talk* are both semantically more specific than *utter*, the sense of which is given in (2).¹

(2) "emit sounds using the vocal tract"

And they are less specific semantically than such verbs as *say*, *tell*, and *communicate*, all of whose senses include mention of what is communicated by the emitted linguistic sounds. Neither *speak* nor *talk* expresses the notion that any thought, idea, or feeling is communicated by the emitted linguistic sounds.²

Speak and *talk* do, of course, differ in usage, just like any other pair of synonymous expressions. The synonymy note under *speak* in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* states this usage difference nicely. *SPEAK* is a general term of wide application. It may on occasion differ from

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¹ To see this difference, compare *Gene uttered a low growl* with the semantically anomalous **Gene spoke/talked a low growl*.

² This fact is somewhat less obvious, but is borne out by the fact that sentences like *Gene spoke/talked for ten minutes without saying anything* are not anomalous, and the fact that one can *speak/talk gibberish*. Of course, there are specialized senses for both *speak* and *talk* in which communication of specific ideas is expressed, but as I point out in the text below, this fact does not bear on the question of what the verbs mean in their nonspecialized sense.

TALK in suggesting a weighty formality. TALK in general may suggest less formality and is likely to implicate auditors and interlocutors.

As the double use of "may" indicates, the difference pointed out in this note are rhetorical rather than semantic in nature. That is, the use of *speaks* does not entail formality (the locution *speaks informally* is not contradictory), and the use of *talks* entails neither formality nor the presence of auditors or interlocutors (the locutions *talks formally* and *talks without talking to/with anyone* are not contradictory). Therefore, none of these differences has anything to do with what the verbs mean.

Speak and *talk* also each have specialized meanings which they do not share. Thus, for *speaks*, we have "give a rebuke or reprimand" (*I'll speak to him about that*) and "communicate by being interesting or attractive" (*That painting really speaks to me*); while for *talks*, there is "persuade, influence, or affect by talking" (*We talked him out of it*) and "reveal secret or confidential information" (*Unless he talks, we're safe*).³ But these differences in specialized meaning are irrelevant to the question of the synonymy of the two verbs in their nonspecialized sense.

The fact that *speaks* and *talks* are synonymous has a consequence for linguistic theory. McCawley (1968: 134-136) has argued that all selection restrictions are semantically based. In reply, Katz (1972: 396) pointed out several counterexamples, any one of which is sufficient to refute McCawley's hypothesis. However, none of Katz's examples involved a verb, the part of speech *par excellence* that carries selection restrictions. But now we have such an example, since *speaks* and *talks* are synonymous verbs but differ in their selection restrictions.⁴ To see this, consider sentences (3) and (4).

(3) *Gene spoke six words.*

(4) **Gene talked six words.*

Substituting for the word *words* in (3) and (4) other expressions that denote linguistic elements, for example *syllables*, *phrases*, *sentences*, etc., the pattern is the same. The verb *talks* is anomalously used with direct objects that denote linguistic elements, *speaks* is not.⁵ In the formalism

³ Several more specialized meanings could be given for each verb. Moreover, both *speaks* and *talks* enter into idiomatic combinations with particles, such as *up* and *out*, with quite different senses (compare the meanings of *speaks up* and *talks up*, for example), and the derived agentive nominals *speaker* and *talker* are also distinct semantically. How to explain such states of affairs as this is a crucial problem in lexicology.

⁴ This example, with discussion, does appear in Katz (1973: 567).

⁵ Incredibly, *The American Heritage Dictionary* gives, under *talks*, the example *Those are real words the baby is talking*. Everyone I have asked concerning this example

(roughly) of Chomsky (1965), *speak* is positively specified for the selection restriction [____[Linguistic Element]], *talk* is negatively specified for that restriction.⁶

The only way in which one could save McCawley's hypothesis against this crushing counterexample would be to show that the grammaticality difference between (3) and (4) is due to some other device in the grammar besides selection.⁷ There is, as far as I can determine, exactly one possible alternative of this sort. Suppose we say that (4) is well-formed at the level of deep structure (or semantic structure, if one is a generative semanticist), and does not contain a violation of a selection restriction. Then, there might just be a syntactic transformation that deletes direct objects of certain verbs (call it Object Deletion), and this rule might just apply obligatorily to direct objects of the verb *talk* when those objects are specified as linguistic elements. Certainly there is a rule of Object Deletion in English; it applies, for example, in the derivation of sentences like (5) from structures like those that underlie (6).

(5) *Gene writes elegantly.*

(6) *Gene writes letters/articles/books/poetry/ ... elegantly.*

Indeed, to avoid the embarrassment of having to say that sentences like (5) are potentially infinitely ambiguous, depending upon which direct object in (6) is deleted, one would have to say that what is deleted is specified simply as [Specimen of Writing], a feature much like [Linguistic Element].

Unfortunately for this line of argument, the parallelism just established between *talk* and *write* breaks down. Object Deletion applies, in the case of *write*, when its direct object is specified only as [Specimen of Writing]; if it is further specified, the rule is inapplicable. Thus, given the structure underlying (7), we cannot obtain (8), or anything else for that matter, by Object Deletion.

has found it anomalous, some even spontaneously suggesting that *talking* should be replaced by *speaking* in the example.

⁶ This observation appears also to falsify the claim in McCawley (1971:290) that "a selection restriction imposed by an item... is a presupposition about what an item in semantic representation purports to denote", since clearly it would be absurd to say that *talk* presupposes that its direct object in semantic representation cannot denote a linguistic element. The sense of *talk* in fact dictates that its semantic direct object must denote a linguistic element.

⁷ In desperation, one could try to argue that (4) is grammatical, and only unacceptable. But on what independent basis one could substantiate such a claim, I have no idea.

(7) *Gene wrote six words.*

(8) *Gene wrote.*

Furthermore, it is a general fact about Object Deletion that semantically specific direct objects cannot be deleted; it is simply not a fact about the application of that rule in sentences whose main verb is *write*. This matter becomes particularly clear if one considers the deletion of "cognate objects" in English by Object Deletion. Thus, while (9) is obligatorily transformed into (10) by Object Deletion, (11) is, and must be, unaffected by that rule.

(9) **Gene dreamed a dream.*

(10) *Gene dreamed.*

(11) *Gene dreamed a particularly striking dream.*

From this property of Object Deletion, we conclude that (4) cannot be ungrammatical by virtue of the failure to apply Object Deletion. Object Deletion, even were it to be applicable to direct objects of the verb *talk*, could not be applicable in (4) because of the specificity of the direct object in that sentence. We conclude that the sentence must be ungrammatical because of some deformity in it at the level of syntactic deep structure. That deformity is nothing other than a violation of a syntactic selection restriction.

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