



A frame-semantic approach to English communication verbs

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Ahn, Byeongkil. 2025. A frame-semantic approach to English communication verbs. *Linguistic Research* 42(3): 627-656. This paper presents a unified Frame Semantics account of *say*, *tell*, *speak*, and *talk*. All four verbs instantiate the [Communication] frame but diverge in (i) foregrounded Frame Elements (FEs), (ii) syntactic realizations, and (iii) discourse functions. Corpus evidence with FrameNet-style FE tagging shows: *say* foregrounds Message (SVO/SVO +that); *tell* foregrounds Addressee with a caused-possession profile (SVOO, NP+that, NP+to-inf); *speak* highlights Mode/Language and verbal performance (intransitive + PP: to/with/about); *talk* foregrounds Interaction/Topic (intransitive + PP). These contrasts form a functional continuum ranging from content-centered through recipient-centered and mode/formality-centered to interaction-centered communication. The analysis links FE foregrounding to argument structure and discourse roles. Pedagogically, it explains recurrent learner errors and informs instruction on register-sensitive verb choice. Computationally, it benefits reporting-verb detection, semantic role labeling, and indirect-speech identification. Limitations include potential subjectivity in FE boundaries and limited genre coverage; future work will model register effects and test cross-linguistic correspondences. Overall, the findings support Frame Semantics as a robust lens connecting lexical meaning, syntax, and discourse in communicative verb classes. (Gyeongsang National University)

Keywords communication verbs, frame semantics, frame, frame element, discourse functions, COCA

1. Introduction

In linguistic research, communication verbs have long been central to the study of the structure and meaning of speech acts. In English, *say*, *tell*, *speak*, and *talk* are four of the most frequently used core verbs, appearing repeatedly across a variety

of discourse contexts-spoken and written, formal and informal. These verbs do more than simply indicate the act of verbal communication; they reveal how semantic components such as the message, speaker, addressee, topic, and medium are foregrounded and organized, thus providing key insights into the structure of communicative events. Previous grammatical and semantic studies have often examined these verbs in relation to reported speech, quotative structures, and complement clause patterns, typically distinguishing *say* and *tell* as reporting verbs and *speak* and *talk* as speech-act verbs.

However, what has not been sufficiently emphasized in prior research is that, although these four verbs all share the general meaning of “to communicate verbally,” they each foreground different semantic frames and frame elements. For instance, *say* focuses primarily on the message itself, with the addressee expressed optionally (*say (to someone) that...*). In contrast, *tell* centers on the addressee, syntactically requiring a human object (*tell someone something*) and extending to directive meanings (*tell someone to V*). *Speak*, on the other hand, foregrounds the act of speaking itself rather than the message, often denoting language ability or communicative situation (*speak English; speak to the manager*). Finally, *talk* emphasizes interactive discourse, highlighting the interlocutor relationship (*talk with/to someone*) and topical discussion (*talk about something*), while being rarely used to directly report specific utterances.

These differences are not merely subtle lexical nuances but rather reflect how the shared [Communication] frame is differently instantiated by each of the four verbs. Although *say*, *tell*, *speak*, and *talk* all share the same superordinate Communication frame, each verb selectively foregrounds different core Frame Elements (FEs), resulting in distinct semantic and syntactic constraints. This variation often causes difficulties for English learners in distinguishing the appropriate usage of these “speaking” verbs, and it also carries significant implications for discourse analysis and language pedagogy.

Accordingly, the present study aims to systematically compare and analyze the semantic and syntactic properties of *say*, *tell*, *speak*, and *talk* within the theoretical framework of Frame Semantics (Fillmore 1982, 1985). Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) What is the internal structure of the shared Communication frame?
- (2) Which Frame Elements (FEs) are most prominently foregrounded by each verb?

- (3) How do differences in foregrounding lead to variation in syntactic realization and in discourse function?

Based on large-scale corpus data (COCA and BNC), this study collects and analyzes authentic examples to identify semantic-syntactic patterns and to provide a frame-semantic account of the differential characteristics of English communication verbs.

2. Theoretical background and previous studies

2.1 Frame semantics

Fillmore's Frame Semantics is a meaning-based theory that explains how linguistic expressions evoke structured background knowledge called frames. A frame is a cognitive schema or scenario that includes typical participants, relations, and situations—for example, a Commercial Transaction frame involves a buyer, a seller, goods, and money. In this view, the meaning of a word or construction is fully understood only within such a frame, emphasizing that linguistic meaning is part of encyclopedic knowledge rather than a list of dictionary definitions. The theory originated in Fillmore's Case Grammar of the 1960s, where he proposed that verbs select semantic roles (Agent, Patient, Instrument). In the 1970s he re-conceptualized these role structures as frames, arguing in Fillmore (1976, 1977) that every lexical item presupposes a background of experience and cultural knowledge. During the 1980s, Fillmore integrated this idea into Cognitive Linguistics, highlighting usage-based, context-sensitive meaning (Fillmore 1982, 1985). In the 1990s the theory became empirically grounded through the Berkeley FrameNet Project (Baker, Fillmore, and Lowe 1998), which systematically annotated corpora with Frames, Frame Elements (FEs), and Lexical Units (LUs) to map meaning-syntax correspondences. Since the 2000s, Frame Semantics has expanded through Construction Grammar, multilingual FrameNets, and applications in AI and Natural Language Processing, linking linguistic meaning, conceptual knowledge, and computational modeling. In sum, Frame Semantics defines linguistic meaning as the activation of structured background knowledge, evolving from semantic role theory into a comprehensive framework that

unites lexical semantics, cognition, and corpus-based evidence.

2.2 Previous studies

Previous studies on the communication verbs *say*, *tell*, *speak*, and *talk* have examined the semantic, syntactic, and discourse characteristics of these verbs from various perspectives. Quirk et al. (1985), Huddleston and Pullum (2002), and Biber et al. (1999, 2021) systematically described the types of complement clauses, preposition choices, and spoken/written distributions of the four verbs based on large corpora. However, their analyses remained within a descriptive grammatical framework rather than providing a fine-grained account of discourse functions. Hunston and Francis's (2000) Pattern Grammar highlighted conventional patterns such as *say* + *that*, *tell* + NP + *that*, and *speak/talk* + *about/to* from a lexico-grammatical perspective, effectively capturing actual usage, but it did not fully theorize the link between pattern and meaning/function. Levin (1993), through verb-class and alternation analyses, classified *tell* as involving a recipient argument and *speak/talk* as intransitive verbs marking topics, yet did not extend the analysis to information-structural or discourse-functional distinctions.

By contrast, Thompson and Ye (1991) and Hyland (1999, 2002) explored the functional distribution of reporting verbs in academic discourse, showing that *say* tends to be neutral, *tell* is oriented toward an addressee, and *speak/talk* emphasize interactive or contextual engagement. These studies illuminated their role in text organization and stance marking but paid less attention to specific grammatical constraints or systematic correspondences across speech types. FrameNet and Frame Semantics research clarified which frame elements (FEs) these verbs foreground within the [Communication] frame-e.g., *say* highlights the Message, *tell* the Addressee, *speak* the Mode/Topic, and *talk* the Interactive exchange-and demonstrated strengths in explaining polysemy, alternation, and discourse functions. Nonetheless, issues remain concerning the boundaries of frame definitions and cross-linguistic universality.

Finally, in learner error studies, Sawai et al. (2013) proposed an ESL writing correction system based on learner corpora, identifying *say/tell* confusion as one of the typical error pairs and suggesting an automated verb-suggestion approach for correction. Handayani (2022) also analyzed the syntactic and collocational patterns

of *say* and *tell* from a learner perspective, explaining the sources of confusion and pedagogical remedies, while Dünnhaupt and Haase (2021) developed classroom materials using corpus-based exercises to help learners clearly distinguish *tell/say* constructions. Such learner error studies align with López's general framework for learner corpus error analysis, sharing methodological foundations in computational tagging and error-type classification. Meanwhile, the distinction between *speak* and *talk* has been discussed mainly in terms of register differences. Knörr and Stuart (2013), using the BNC and COCA, reported that *talk* occurs overwhelmingly in conversational registers, whereas *speak* is preferred in formal contexts or when combined with language labels (e.g., *speak in English*). Although Biber's (2006) study of academic discourse did not directly compare *speak* and *talk*, it demonstrated that verb choice varies across spoken and written registers, thereby empirically supporting the contextual constraints on verb use. Likewise, Biber and Conrad's Register Variation remains a seminal study illustrating how linguistic form and function differ by register, providing a methodological foundation for interpreting the functional distribution of *speak* and *talk*.

In summary, *say* and *tell* have been primarily examined in learner- oriented studies of error and pedagogy, while *speak* and *talk* have been explored in corpus-based research focusing on register-related frequency and semantic distinctions. Thus, the differentiation among the four verbs constitutes an important topic in both learner language education and register-based usage studies. Overall, previous research can be grouped into grammatical and corpus-based descriptions, pattern-based approaches, discourse-functional analyses, and frame-semantic modeling- each offering valuable insights yet also revealing limitations that call for an integrated analytical framework in future studies.

3. Communication verbs and frame semantics

3.1 The verb *say*

3.1.1 Invoked frame: [Statement] [Communication]

The English verb *say* typically evokes the [Statement] or [Communication] frame.

This frame centers on the act in which a Speaker expresses a specific Message, and may also involve the transmission of the utterance toward an optional Addressee. Within this frame, the most central and foregrounded Frame Element (FE) is the Message, while the Addressee is an optional element that is usually realized as a prepositional phrase (to + NP).

Unlike other communication verbs such as *tell*, *say* focuses more on the content of the utterance than on the recipient of the speech act. In other words, while *tell* highlights the relational aspect of “speaking to someone,” *say* foregrounds the informational aspect of “saying something.” Because of this content-centered orientation, *say* functions as a neutral reporting device in discourse, typically used to convey the content of an utterance without implying strong evaluative stance or interpersonal relationship between the speaker and the hearer.

3.1.2 Foregrounded frame elements (FEs)

The frame elements foregrounded by the verb *say* are distributed as follows. First, the Message is an obligatory element that must be realized, typically expressed through a direct quotation or an indirect that-clause, which presents the specific content of the utterance. In contrast, the Addressee is an optional element referring to the target of the speech act, usually realized peripherally in the form of a to + NP phrase. Finally, the Speaker is generally realized as the subject of the clause, but when the discourse focus is on the message, the speaker tends to be backgrounded and thus less salient.

This distribution of elements demonstrates that *say* emphasizes the content of the utterance rather than its interpersonal or relational aspect, aligning closely with its characteristic reportive neutrality—a neutral and descriptive function that prioritizes the conveyed message over speaker-hearer dynamics.

3.1.3 Syntactic realization patterns

According to the COCA and BNC corpora, the verb *say* is primarily realized through eight basic syntactic patterns.

- (1) a. She said, “I can’t help you.”
- b. He said that the meeting was canceled.

- c. And they respectfully said to me we don't want to repeat this.
- d. He didn't say whether it was true.
- e. His sword is said to be blessed by God himself.
- f. Say we start at six-would that work?
- g. If you have a problem with it, say so.
- h. The main, vain thing I want to say about the video is this.

Example (1a) represents the direct quotation construction of the verb *say*, which is the most frequent among the eight syntactic patterns (32%). Syntactically, it follows the structure *say* + quotation. This construction evokes the [Statement] frame, whose core Frame Elements are Speaker (She), Message ("I can't help you."), and an implicit Addressee (understood from context). Semantically, this construction functions to demonstratively present the speech act itself by reproducing the speaker's original utterance. The focus, therefore, is on the speech performance rather than on the propositional content, realizing a representation of the act of saying, not a paraphrase or summary. Example (1b) illustrates the *that*-clause complement construction of the verb *say*, which is the second most frequent pattern (28%). Syntactically, it follows the structure *say* + *that* S. This construction evokes the [Statement/Report] frame, whose core FEs are Speaker (He) and Message (that the meeting was canceled). Semantically, rather than reproducing the exact utterance, this construction conveys information through indirect speech, performing a reportive function that summarizes or relays content. Here, the focus is not on the act of speaking itself but on the content of what was said, functioning as a typical reportive pattern in narrative and informational contexts. Example (1c) illustrates the *to*-PP complement construction of *say*, syntactically realized as *say* + *to* + NP + S. This construction evokes the [Statement] frame and includes the following core FEs: Speaker (They), Addressee (me), Message (we don't want to repeat this), and Manner (respectfully). By explicitly marking the addressee, this structure realizes an interactive speech act, extending beyond simple information transfer to signal interpersonal engagement. The addition of the Manner FE reflects the speaker's attitude or level of formality, indexing politeness or social distance. Consequently, this construction represents a two-way communication pattern, simultaneously encoding the social relationality and discursual etiquette inherent in the act of speaking. Example (1d) illustrates the *wh*-*if*-clause complement construction of the verb *say*, syntactically realized as *say* + *wh/if*-clause.

This construction evokes the [Statement/Information] frame, whose core Frame Elements are Speaker (He) and Message (whether it was true). Semantically, it indicates that the speaker does not explicitly assert the truth value of the information, thereby expressing indeterminacy or non-commitment. In this sense, *say* here describes not an act of positive assertion but rather a negative speech act—the act of not saying. Discoursally, it functions as a non-assertive reporting device that signals informational gaps or suspended judgment. Example (1e) represents the evidential passive construction of *say*, syntactically realized as *be said to-V*. This construction evokes the [Evidential/Report] frame, whose core FEs are an unexpressed Speaker /Source and the Proposition (to be blessed by God). Semantically, it functions as an impersonal evidential expression, where the information source is unspecified and the speaker is decentralized, presenting the content as if it were an objective fact. Consequently, this construction creates a distancing effect, conveying that “*it is said that...*” without committing the speaker to the truth of the claim, and thus serves the discourse function of reporting without source specification. Example (1f) illustrates the hypothetical or discourse-marker construction, syntactically realized as *say* + S. This construction evokes the [Hypothesis/Proposal] frame, whose core FEs are an implicit Speaker (the discourse participant) and a Proposition (we start at six). Semantically, rather than denoting an actual speech act, this usage introduces a hypothetical assumption for discourse progression, as in “*let’s say*” or “*suppose that*.” Here, *say* shifts from its literal meaning of “*to speak*” to a discourse-marker function similar to *suppose* or *imagine*, with the focus on exploring possibilities or proposing scenarios rather than describing real acts of speaking. Example (1g) presents the pro-form construction of *say*, syntactically realized as *say* + *so/it/yes/no/ something*. This construction evokes the [Response/Assertion] frame, whose core FEs are Speaker (you) and an implicit Message (the substituted utterance). Semantically, by replacing an explicit statement with a pro-form, the construction compresses the utterance content and realizes a responsive speech act, urging the addressee to clarify or assert their stance. Thus, *say* here goes beyond simple reporting, functioning as an explicitness marker that converts implication or assumption into overt linguistic expression. Discoursally, it operates as a perlocutionary directive, prompting the interlocutor to provide a clear, responsible response. Example (1h) illustrates the about-PP combination construction of the verb *say*, syntactically realized as *say* + *about* + NP. This construction evokes the [Commentary/Statement] frame, whose core Frame Elements are Speaker (I), Topic

(about the video), and Message (this). Semantically, it topicalizes a specific referent (the video), explicitly marking it as the subject of discussion, and performs a commentary function by expressing the speaker's evaluative remark or opinion on that topic. Thus, in this construction, *say* functions not merely as a reporting verb but as a discourse-organizing device that structures the overall utterance and establishes the discourse focus. It simultaneously reveals the speaker's attitudinal stance, serving as a marker of evaluation or commentary within the discourse.

3.1.4 Discourse functions

In discourse contexts, *say* primarily functions as a neutral reporting verb. Specifically, first, it introduces direct or indirect quotations, presenting the content of an utterance. Second, it conveys propositional information without expressing the speaker's attitude or evaluation, thereby maintaining descriptive neutrality. Third, it serves as a discourse cue that signals a shift from narration to quotation, integrating the speaker's utterance naturally into the narrative structure. Fourth, by minimizing speaker involvement, *say* helps maintain the flow of discourse and directs the listener's or reader's attention toward the content of the utterance itself. Owing to this neutrality, *say* is clearly distinguished from verbs like *tell*, which are addressee-centered, and from *claim*, which emphasizes the speaker's stance or evaluative commitment.

3.2 The verb *tell*

3.2.1 Invoked frame: [Telling] [Communication]

The English verb *tell* typically evokes the [Telling/Communication] frame, which differs from *say* in that it foregrounds the Addressee. In this frame, communication is construed as an interactive act, in which the Speaker directs a specific Message toward a Recipient. Consequently, the Addressee functions as a core and obligatory Frame Element (FE), while the Message tends to be backgrounded or realized as a secondary component. This addressee-centered nature sharply contrasts with the message-centered orientation of *say* and accounts for the distinctive syntactic and discourse characteristics of *tell*.

3.2.2 Foregrounded frame elements

When analyzed within the [Telling/Communication] frame, *tell* shows a distinct distribution of foregrounded Frame Elements that differentiates it from other communication verbs such as *say*. First, the Addressee is a core and indispensable FE; without it, the communicative event is incomplete. Syntactically, the addressee is typically realized as a direct object noun phrase (NP), as in *She told him the story* or *He told the audience that the event was canceled*. The indispensability of the addressee highlights the interpersonal dimension of communication and allows *tell* to be interpreted as a caused-possession predicate. The notion of caused possession refers to an event in which the speaker “causes someone to come to have something” that they did not previously possess. Traditionally, this meaning is central to double-object constructions (SVOO) such as *give*, and *tell* fits this pattern in that it causes the recipient to “possess” a piece of information—an abstract, non-material object. Second, the Message serves as a supplementary FE, realized through various syntactic forms: as a noun phrase (*She told him the truth*), a that-clause (*He told us that he was leaving*), or an infinitival clause (*They told the children to wait*). This diversity shows that the message plays a subordinate role relative to the addressee: while the content of communication is important, in *tell* what matters more is to whom the information is conveyed. Finally, the Speaker is typically realized as the grammatical subject but tends to be backgrounded at the discourse level. This contrasts with *say*, where the speaker-message relation is central. In *tell*, by comparison, the addressee-message relation receives greater discourse prominence.

3.2.3 Syntactic realization patterns

According to data from the COCA and BNC corpora, the verb *tell* is realized in seven major syntactic patterns, as illustrated below:

- (2) a. They told the children to stay inside.
- b. He told the audience that the meeting was canceled.
- c. Tell me what to do now that you are done with me.
- d. Writers were told to leave by 5 p.m. that day.
- e. He was told that the driver had been released.

- f. All I've ever done is tell the truth.
- g. I'm just going to tell on you, Donn.

Example (2a) represents the canonical double-object construction with an infinitival complement, syntactically realized as *tell* + *person* + *to-V*. This construction evokes the [Command/Directive] frame, whose core Frame Elements are Speaker (They), Addressee (the children), and Message (to stay inside). Semantically, it expresses not mere information transfer but a directive speech act, in which the speaker requests or commands the addressee to perform a specific action. The focus of the utterance lies not in what was said, but in to whom and what was instructed. In other words, this construction concretizes the speaker's intention as a performative act, functioning as an action-inducing (performative) directive. Example (2b) illustrates the double-object + *that*-clause complement construction of the verb *tell*, which is the most frequent pattern (40%). Syntactically, it follows the structure *tell* + *person* + *that* S. This construction evokes the [Statement/Communication] frame, with the core Frame Elements Speaker (He), Addressee (the audience), and Message (that the meeting was canceled). Semantically, it encodes a reportive speech act, in which the speaker conveys factual or propositional information to the listener. Crucially, the Addressee is a central element, distinguishing *tell* from *say*. The communicative focus here is not "what was said" but rather "to whom the information was delivered," revealing *tell*'s inherently interactive nature in discourse. Example (2c) represents the imperative + *wh*-clause complement construction, syntactically realized as *tell* + *person* + *wh*- clause. This construction evokes the [Instruction/Guidance] frame, whose core FEs are Speaker (implicit), Addressee (me), and Message (what to do). Semantically, it performs an instructive or guidance speech act, in which the speaker requests advice or directions for action from the addressee. The *wh*-clause expresses uncertainty regarding the appropriate course of action ("what to do"), thereby transforming the utterance into an interactive directive that not only communicates information but also elicits response, judgment, and engagement from the addressee. Example (2d) represents the passive directive construction of the verb *tell*, which is the second most frequent pattern (18%). Syntactically, it follows the structure *be told to-V*. This construction evokes the [Directive/Evidential] frame, with core Frame Elements Addressee (writers), Speaker (unspecified), and Message (to leave). Semantically, the agent of the directive act is unexpressed and backgrounded, giving the construction

an impersonal evidential directive meaning-“*someone was told (by others) to do something.*” The focus is not on the speaker’s act but on the result of the directive and the objectivity of the information. Discoursally, it functions as an authoritative or normative statement, implying the presence of institutional authority or regulation behind the directive.

Example (2e) illustrates the passive that-clause complement construction, syntactically realized as *be told that S*. This construction evokes the [Evidential/Communication] frame, whose core Frame Elements are Addressee (He), Speaker (unspecified), and Message (that the driver had been released). Semantically, it denotes that the addressee has received information from an unspecified source, functioning as an evidential report that emphasizes the objectification of information and the indeterminacy of the source. From a speech-act perspective, the focus is shifted from the speaker to the recipient, describing the communicative event from the hearer’s standpoint. Discoursally, this structure foregrounds “what was heard” rather than “who said it,” thus functioning as an addressee-centered reporting construction. Example (2f) shows the NP complement construction of *tell*, syntactically realized as *tell + NP*. This construction evokes the [Statement/Assertion] frame, whose core Frame Elements are Speaker (I) and Message (the truth). Semantically, it encodes an assertive act in which the speaker presents their utterance as a truthful or factual statement, emphasizing truthfulness and honesty. Collocations such as *tell the truth*, *tell a lie*, *tell a story*, and *tell the time* are lexicalized combinations, showing that *tell* carries a performative meaning beyond simple communication. Thus, this construction highlights not mere information reporting but the performative self-justification of the act of truthful assertion-the speaker’s commitment to the veracity of their speech. Example (2g) represents the prepositional derivative construction, syntactically realized as *tell on + person*. This construction evokes the [Reporting/Blame] frame, whose core Frame Elements are Speaker (I), Addressee (an implicit higher authority or listener), and Target (you). Semantically, it expresses a non-neutral reporting act, in which the speaker informs a third party about another person’s wrongdoing or secret. Thus, *tell* here extends beyond standard information transfer to encode functions of blame, exposure, or betrayal. At the discourse level, it operates as a socially consequential act, implying accountability, accusation, or sanction within interpersonal or institutional relationships.

Tell is a communicatively multifunctional verb that goes beyond the simple

meaning of “to say,” realizing a wide range of speech act types such as directive, reportive, advisory, evidential, assertive, and blaming acts. Depending on its syntactic construction, *tell* evokes various subframes- including [Directive], [Communication], [Assertion], [Evidential], and [Blame] -within which frame elements such as Addressee and Message are selectively foregrounded. This variability gives *tell* distinct semantic and pragmatic contrasts from other communication verbs such as *say* or *speak*.

3.2.4 Discourse functions

In discourse contexts, the verb *tell* is not limited to a single reporting function but performs multiple layers of pragmatic roles. First, *tell* serves the function of information transfer. As seen in (2b), *tell* operates as a means of conveying facts or events to a recipient. In this use, the discourse focus lies not on the content of the message itself but on the relationship between the speaker and the addressee-that is, “to whom the news is conveyed” constitutes the communicative core. Second, *tell* fulfills a directive or command function. In sentences such as (2a), the message no longer represents mere factual reporting but rather implies a demand for action. Here, *tell* functions as a speech act that presupposes the speaker’s authority and the addressee’s behavioral compliance, manifesting a clear interpersonal force within the communicative event. Third, *tell* performs an event-reporting or narrative function. In examples like *They told the story of their journey*, *tell* extends beyond simple information transmission to achieve narrativization, reconstructing events from a particular perspective. In this context, the addressee functions as the listener, while the speaker assumes the role of a narrator.

3.3 The verb *speak*

3.3.1 Invoked frame: [Speaking] [Communication]

The verb *speak* typically evokes the [Speaking/Communication] frame, which distinguishes it from other communication verbs in that it foregrounds the act of speaking itself rather than the propositional content of communication. In other words, while *say* highlights the Message and *tell* foregrounds the Addressee, *speak* centers

on the medium of communication, the language used, and the social act of verbal interaction. Because of this property, *speaking* functions less as a tool for information transmission and more as a verb emphasizing the speaker's linguistic competence or the performance of the speech act itself. For example, expressions such as *speaking English* do not convey specific propositional content but rather highlight the ability to use a particular language, whereas examples like *speaking to the committee* emphasize the formal speaking situation and interactive context rather than the content of the message. Accordingly, *speaking* is more frequently used in formal, public, or institutional settings than in personal or informal ones. This pattern illustrates that *speaking*, unlike other reporting verbs, serves as a key linguistic device that foregrounds the formal and social dimensions of the speech act.

3.3.2 Foregrounded frame elements

An examination of the [Speaking/Communication] frame evoked by the verb *speaking* reveals several distinctive semantic characteristics that set it apart from other communication verbs. First, the Medium/Language is the most central Frame Element in *speaking*, highlighting the linguistic code or language itself as the focus of communication. Expressions such as *speaking English* or *speaking French* emphasize not the transmission of propositional content but rather the speaker's ability to use a particular language, demonstrating the function of *speaking* as an indicator of linguistic competence. Second, the Addressee is typically realized through a prepositional phrase with *to/with* + NP, specifying the interlocutor to whom the speech is directed. Examples like *speaking to the manager* and *speaking with colleagues* foreground the interactive relationship between speaker and listener rather than the informational content of the utterance. Third, the Topic is expressed through an *about*-phrase, specifying the subject matter of the discourse. Constructions such as *speaking about politics* or *speaking about future plans* indicate the thematic focus of the speech event. Finally, while the Speaker is usually realized as the grammatical subject, unlike *say* or *tell*, where the speaker-message relationship is foregrounded, in *speaking* the speaker is not the discourse focus. Instead, the speaker is backgrounded as a participant in an interactional activity, while the communicative focus falls on the medium, interlocutor, or topic of the speech.

This distribution of Frame Elements shows that *speaking* conceptualizes

communication not as content transfer, but as an activity or competence. Accordingly, within the [Communication] frame, *speak* occupies a unique position as a verb that foregrounds the performative and contextual aspects of the speech act.

3.3.3 Syntactic realization patterns

According to data from the COCA and BNC corpora, the verb *speak* is primarily used as an intransitive verb, combining with various prepositional phrase (PP) complements that shift the semantic focus of the clause. This pattern demonstrates that *speak* does not directly convey a message in the sense of explicit content transfer, but rather structures the communicative event around the medium (language), addressee, and topic of the speech act.

- (3) a. He spoke to the manager about the problem.
 b. They spoke about their future plans.
 c. She speaks three languages fluently.
 d. It speaks to the fact that industry can't stand still.
 e. Britt spoke in the locker room after practice on Wednesday.
 f. Republicans don't even have to speak of amnesty.
 g. I was spoken about in a very just physical way.
 h. Please speak up/out.

Example (3a) illustrates the prepositional object construction (to-PP + about-PP) of the verb *speak*, which is the second most frequent pattern (24%). Syntactically, it follows the structure *speak* + *to* + person + *about* + NP. This construction evokes the [Communication/Discussion] frame, whose core Frame Elements are Speaker (He), Addressee (the manager), and Topic (the problem). Semantically, it represents an act of interactive communication, in which the speaker and the hearer exchange opinions on a specific topic. The communicative focus lies not on the transmission of information but on mutual exchange itself. Thus, in this construction, *speak* functions not as a one-way reporting verb like *say* or *tell*, but as a discourse verb emphasizing interpersonal involvement and interaction within communication. Example (3b) represents the topic-marking construction (about-PP) of the verb *speak*, which is the most frequent pattern (28%). Syntactically, it follows the structure *speak* + *about* +

NP. Example (3b) represents the topic-marking construction of *speak*, syntactically realized as *speak* + *about* + *NP*. This construction evokes the [Discussion/Topic] frame, whose core Frame Elements are Speaker (They) and Topic (their future plans). Semantically, it omits the addressee and focuses instead on the topic of discourse, expressing a topic-centered speech act in which the speaker discusses or exchanges opinions about a specific issue or subject. The about-phrase thus functions not merely as a prepositional complement but as a discourse topic marker, indicating that *speak*, unlike *say* or *tell*, focuses on the topic and the process of discussion, highlighting its interactive and reciprocal nature. Example (3c) illustrates the ability or language construction of *speak*, syntactically realized as *speak* + *NP* (language name). This construction evokes the [Ability Linguistic Competence] frame, whose core Frame Elements are Speaker (She), Medium (three languages), and Manner (fluently). Semantically, this construction does not describe an act of speaking but rather a descriptive statement of the speaker's linguistic competence—the ability to use a language. In this sense, *speak* expresses capacity rather than speech performance, functioning at the discourse level as a non-performative description that denotes the possibility or capability of communication. Example (3d) shows the metaphorical subject + to-PP/that-clause construction (metaphorical evidential use) of *speak*, syntactically realized as *speak* + *to* + *NP* / *that* *S*. This construction evokes the [Evidence/Relevance] frame, whose core Frame Elements are Source (metaphorical speaker, It) and Proposition (that industry can't stand still). Semantically, *speak* departs from its literal sense of “to say” and takes on a metaphorical or personified meaning, such as “to indicate,” “to support,” or “to serve as evidence for.” Here, the non-human subject (It-e.g., a result, phenomenon, or data) metaphorically “*speaks*,” shifting the frame from Communication to Evidence. At the discourse level, this construction functions as an evidential implication, presenting indirect evidence rather than direct quotation, and serves to emphasize the credibility and relevance of information within the discourse. Example (3e) illustrates the intransitive construction of *speak* combined with locative and temporal adverbial phrases, referring to a public speech or act of speaking. The syntactic pattern is *speak* (+ *in* + *location PP*) (+ *after* + *time PP*), and it evokes the [Public Speaking/Performance] frame. The core Frame Elements are Speaker (Britt), Location (in the locker room), and Time (after practice on Wednesday), with Manner/Medium as an optional element that may be contextually inferred. Semantically and functionally, this construction describes a public address

or formal act of speech situated in a specific time and place. Unlike *say* or *tell*, which focus on the content or addressee of an utterance, *speaking* here foregrounds the performative nature of the speech event and its situated contextualization. Consequently, this example highlights *speaking*'s locative/temporal anchoring and its association with publicness and performativity.

Example (3f) shows the topic-marking construction of *speaking* with the prepositional phrase of-PP, meaning "to mention" or "to refer to." The syntactic structure is *speaking* + *of* + *NP*, and semantically it performs a referential or mentioning function rather than a simple act of speaking. This construction evokes the [Mention/Topic Reference] frame, expressing that the speaker chooses not to refer to or bring up a certain topic. In this case, the Speaker is Republicans and the Topic is amnesty. Contextually, the statement "not to speak of amnesty" implies that the issue is either already known or politically sensitive, thereby revealing the speaker's stance and implied attitude. Thus, *speaking of* in this use conveys more than verbal mention-it indexes the speaker's position within a sociopolitical or discursive context. Example (3g) represents the passive construction of *speaking* (be spoken about), in which the focus shifts from the speaker to the referenced participant, who becomes the object of discussion or evaluation. The syntactic pattern is *be spoken about* + *prepositional phrase*, evoking the [Evaluation/Reputation] frame. Within this frame, the Addressee (the affected entity) is I, the Source is an unspecified speaker, and the Topic ("in a physical way") represents the implied focus of evaluation. Semantically, this construction indicates that the subject has been talked about or evaluated by others, emphasizing not the act of speaking itself but the representation of a person within others' discourse. Thus, it functions as an expression of reputation or social evaluation, reflecting how one is perceived or discussed in social contexts rather than reporting an act of communication. Example (3h) illustrates the phrasal verb construction of *speaking* combined with the adverbial particles *up* or *out*, evoking the [Expression/Assertion] frame. The syntactic pattern is *speaking* + *particle*, with an implied Addressee (you). Semantically, *speaking up* means "to speak louder" or "to express one's opinion honestly," while *speaking out* means "to state one's opinion openly or publicly." Both forms perform a function of expressive assertion, intensifying the force or explicitness of the utterance. At the discourse level, they serve to encourage the addressee to articulate their thoughts or feelings clearly, promoting openness, assertiveness, and self-expression within communicative interaction.

3.3.4 Discourse functions

In discourse contexts, the verb *speak* performs several functional roles distinct from those of *say* and *tell*. First, *speak* marks the performative aspect of the speech act itself. As seen in *She spoke for two hours.*, the verb emphasizes not what was said but how and for how long the act of speaking took place. This usage shows that *speak* functions not merely as a reporting verb but as one that highlights the speech event as an independent discourse unit, foregrounding the act of communication itself. Second, *speak* serves to indicate linguistic ability. In examples such as (3c), the verb signals the capacity to use a specific language, revealing the speaker's linguistic competence or proficiency. This illustrates that *speak* operates not to convey propositional content but to encode linguistic capability as part of the speaker's identity or communicative skill. Third, *speak* performs the function of formal or public reporting. In sentences like *The president spoke about national security*, *speak* is used in political, institutional, or ceremonial contexts, positioning the act of speaking as a form of public discourse. This function clearly contrasts with *say*, which serves as a neutral reporting verb, and *tell*, which emphasizes directive or addressee-centered communication.

3.4 The verb *talk*

3.4.1 Invoked frame: [Conversation] [Communication]

The verb *talk* typically evokes the [Conversation] or [Communication] frame, which distinguishes it from other communication verbs by construing communication not as a one-way transmission of information but as an interactive and dialogic exchange. Whereas *say* foregrounds the Message, *tell* highlights the Addressee, and *speak* emphasizes the Mode and Linguistic Ability, *talk* centers on the process of reciprocal and cooperative conversation itself. Meaning in *talk* thus does not arise from the unilateral delivery of a fixed message, but is jointly constructed through the interactive participation of both speaker and listener. Because of this feature, *talk* emphasizes not individual speech acts but the mutual and processual nature of conversational activity, functioning as a representative verb that conceptualizes communication as a form of social interaction and discursive cooperation.

3.4.2 Foregrounded frame elements

An analysis of the [Conversation/Communication] frame evoked by the verb *talk* reveals that this verb, unlike other communication verbs, inherently foregrounds interactionality. First, the Interlocutors function as the core Frame Element in *talk*. They are typically realized through prepositional phrases such as *talk to NP* or *talk with NP*, which clearly indicate that the speech event is not a one-way act of transmission but a dialogic exchange. In this frame, the Speaker is not conceived as a simple sender of information but as an active participant in a shared discourse. Second, the Topic is realized through an about-PP, specifying the central focus of the conversation. Constructions such as *talk about politics* or *talk about their plans* show that the communicative focus lies not on a fixed message but on the shared subject matter around which the discourse unfolds. Third, the Speaker, although grammatically realized as the subject of the clause, is discursively interpreted as one of multiple participants in the interaction. In other words, *talk* positions the speaker not as an independent provider of information but as a co-participant in dialogic interaction.

This distribution of Frame Elements demonstrates that *talk* is essentially an interaction-oriented communication verb. Rather than emphasizing static propositional content, *talk* foregrounds the relationship between participants and the shared discourse topic, thereby conceptualizing communication as a collaborative and co-constructed process.

3.4.3 Syntactic realization patterns

According to COCA and BNC corpus analysis, the verb *talk* is primarily used in intransitive constructions, often combined with various prepositional complements that shift the discourse focus depending on context. This pattern clearly illustrates that, unlike other communication verbs, *talk* inherently foregrounds the interactive and dialogic nature of communication.

- (4) a. She talked to her colleague about the project.
- b. They talked about their holiday plans.
- c. We talked on the phone a few times.

- d. She talks him into buying a little house.
- e. Perez was talked about for the seat left by retiring Sen.
- f. The bank executives had talked up their diversity efforts.
- g. But I'd rather not talk business with the help.
- h. She talks that she is speaking in a different manner than normal.

Example (4a) illustrates a typical interactive construction with a bivalent structure (to + NP + about + NP), which is the most frequent pattern (31%) and evokes the [Conversation/Communication] frame. In this frame, the Speaker is she, the Addressee is her colleague, and the Topic is the project. This construction expresses interactive conversation between two participants, encompassing not merely the act of speaking but also information exchange and cooperative interaction. The prepositional phrase to + NP explicitly marks the conversational partner, while about + NP specifies the topic, together situating the speech act within a social or professional context. As such, the construction highlights discursive exchange aimed at mutual understanding and collaboration. Example (4b) represents the topic-marking construction, which is the second most frequent pattern (29%). It follows the structure *talk* + *about* + NP and evokes the [Discussion/Topic Reference] frame. In this frame, the Speaker is they and the Topic is their holiday plans. The preposition about shifts the discourse focus to the topic, while the addressee remains implicit. This indicates that the utterance is not primarily concerned with transferring information to a specific listener, but with a topic-centered communication that revolves around shared concerns or interests among the speakers. Thus, this construction tends to function as a discussion of mutual interest rather than a turn-by-turn dialogue, where the discourse purpose is exploring a topic or exchanging information, rather than issuing directives. This syntactic pattern is typical of *talk* when it functions as a topic-oriented discourse verb rather than a dialogue-act verb. Example (4c) demonstrates a medium-marking construction, realized as *talk* + *on* + NP, evoking the [Communication by Medium/Contacting frame]. In this frame, the Speaker is we and the Medium is on the phone. This construction foregrounds the means of communication rather than its content, highlighting a non-face- to-face communicative situation (telecommunication). It indicates that the interlocutors engaged in repeated contact and conversation via the medium of the phone, thereby also implying frequency and continuity of the relationship. Example (4d) is a representative instance of the causative–persuasion

construction, syntactically realized as *talk* + *NP* + *into* + *V-ing*, which evokes the [Persuasion/Influence frame]. In this frame, the Speaker (Agent) is she, the Addressee (Target) is him, and the Action (Goal) is buying a little house. This construction does not simply express an act of speaking but rather a communicative causation, where the speaker uses linguistic influence to induce the listener to perform a specific action. In other words, the utterance functions as an instrumental act that produces psychological or volitional change in the listener. Through discourse, the speaker exerts influence that alters the addressee's decision and triggers an action, forming a clear instance of language-based causation. Example (4e) combines a passive construction with a topic-marking about-PP, evoking the [Evaluation/Reputation frame]. In this frame, the Mentioned Entity is Perez, and the Topic is the seat left by retiring Senator. The subject Perez is foregrounded not as the speaker but as the referenced participant, the person being talked about or evaluated by others. The speaker is unspecified and interpreted as an indefinite collective, indicating an impersonal reference within social or political discourse. Such usage implies that Perez has been mentioned as a potential candidate for the vacated senatorial position, functioning as an act of social evaluation or reputation discourse rather than simple information reporting. Thus, the linguistic act reflects how discourse can serve as a medium for social recognition and evaluative commentary. Example (4f) illustrates a phrasal verb construction, where *talk up* means "to praise," "to promote," or "to exaggerate." This construction evokes the [Promotion/Evaluation frame], in which the Speaker is the bank executives and the Message/Topic is their diversity efforts. Here, the act of speaking is not neutral information transfer but a discursive strategy aimed at positive evaluation and self-promotion. The speakers highlight the organization's diversity initiatives in an overly favorable manner to enhance their public image, representing a case of language-mediated reputation management-the use of language as a tool for improving social perception. Example (4g) presents an idiomatic NP complement construction, realized as *talk* + *business*, evoking the [Discussion/Professional Discourse] frame. In this frame, the Speaker is I, the Addressee is the help, and the Topic is business. The expression *talk business* idiomatically means "to discuss work matters," referring not to casual conversation but to professional discourse. In this example, the speaker deliberately avoids discussing business with the help, which reflects an awareness of social hierarchy and relational distance. Thus, the utterance functions beyond the literal act of speaking-it linguistically encodes social boundaries and power asymmetry within

discourse. Example (4h) shows a non-canonical construction, *talk* + *that*-clause, though in natural usage it would more typically appear as *say that* or *talk about the fact that*. This construction evokes the [Statement/Self-reference] frame, with the Speaker as she and the Message as she is speaking in a different manner than normal. Grammatically unconventional but semantically interpretable, this construction expresses a self-referential act of communication, in which the speaker comments on and evaluates her own way of speaking. In doing so, the speaker simultaneously displays self-awareness and engages in meta-communicative reflection, using language to describe her own communicative behavior.

Together, these examples demonstrate that the verb *talk* extends far beyond the simple meaning of “to speak.” It activates a range of communication subframes—including conversation, discussion, persuasion, evaluation, and self-reference—under the overarching [Communication] frame. Depending on context, *talk* selectively foregrounds specific Frame Elements such as Addressee, Topic, Medium, Message, or Evaluation, thereby functioning as a multifunctional discourse verb that captures diverse modes of interpersonal and social communication.

3.4.4 Discourse functions

In discourse contexts, the verb *talk* performs several pragmatic functions distinct from those of *speak*, particularly emphasizing interactivity and informality. First, *talk* foregrounds dialogic interaction. As in the example *We talked for hours.*, the act of communication is presented not as a one-way process of information transmission or reporting, but as a reciprocal and cooperative exchange between speaker and listener. This demonstrates that *talk* conceptualizes communication as an inherently bidirectional participatory process.

Second, *talk* signals an informal style. Examples such as *They talked about movies all evening* show that *talk* is typically used in everyday and personal discourse contexts, rather than in institutional or formal settings. This characteristic contrasts with *speak*, which tends to occur in formal or official contexts, and makes *talk* a clear linguistic marker of familiar and intimate communication. Third, *talk* performs the function of topical development. In examples like *He talked about his experiences abroad*, the discourse unfolds not around a fixed propositional message but around a shared topic, structuring the exchange as a process of joint exploration and discussion. Through

this function, *talk* helps to organize shared experiences, interests, and opinions among interlocutors.

In sum, *talk* situates communication within a social and collaborative frame, in clear contrast to *speak*, which frames speech as a performative or institutional act. In other words, *talk* can be defined as a verb that foregrounds informal and interactive discourse functions, highlighting the cooperative and relational nature of communication.

3.5 Comparative analysis of *say*, *tell*, *speak*, and *talk*

3.5.1 Shared frame

The verbs *say*, *tell*, *speak*, and *talk* all share the higher-level [Communication] frame, which conceptualizes the act whereby a Speaker conveys linguistic material to a potential Addressee. This shared frame provides a conceptual backbone, as all four verbs participate in describing the same general type of communicative event. However, each verb diverges in which Frame Elements (FEs) it foregrounds, how these are syntactically realized, and what discourse functions it performs. Specifically, *say* centers on the Message, *tell* foregrounds the Addressee, *speak* highlights the mode and linguistic medium of expression, and *talk* emphasizes interaction and topic. Thus, while all four verbs are situated within the same overarching [Communication] frame, they construct distinct semantic and pragmatic profiles through their unique configurations of FE prominence, syntactic realization, and discourse function. This demonstrates that even within a shared conceptual frame, verb-specific specializations reflect nuanced ways in which language encodes communicative events, offering crucial evidence of how meaning differentiation arises within the same semantic domain.

3.5.2 Foregrounded frame elements

Although the four verbs *say*, *tell*, *speak*, and *talk* all evoke the [Communication] frame, each one foregrounds different Frame Elements, thereby defining its own semantic and pragmatic distinctiveness. First, *say* foregrounds the Message as its central FE, making the content of the utterance the primary focus of discourse. The Addressee

is only optionally realized, which underscores *say*'s emphasis on neutral transmission of information rather than interpersonal engagement. By contrast, *tell* obligatorily foregrounds the Addressee. This reflects the verb's caused-possession semantics, in which information is conceptualized as something "given" or "transferred" to a recipient. The Message is often realized as a secondary element. Hence, *tell* can be characterized as a recipient-centered communication verb, where to whom takes precedence over what. *Speak* foregrounds the speech act itself and the linguistic medium, focusing not on propositional content but on the performative and linguistic capacity aspects of communication. Because of this feature, *speak* is typically used in formal or institutional contexts, functioning as a marker of public or socially framed discourse acts. Finally, *talk* foregrounds interaction and topic. It conceptualizes communication not as the mere transfer of information but as a mutual, collaborative process in which the speaker and listener jointly exchange meanings and share topics.

3.5.3 Syntactic realizations

Although the four verbs *say*, *tell*, *speak*, and *talk* all share the [Communication] frame, each verb exhibits clearly distinct patterns of syntactic realization. First, *say* and *tell* primarily occur in transitive constructions. *Say* frequently appears in the SVO structure (e.g., *She said a few words*) or in SVO + that-clause constructions (e.g., *He said that he was tired*), tending to express the Message directly and explicitly. *Tell*, by contrast, typically requires an explicit Addressee (NP), realized in either the SVOO structure (*tell someone something*) or the SVO + NP + that-clause construction (*He told her that the train was late*). This difference shows that while both verbs foreground an object-centered orientation, *say* emphasizes content-centered reporting, whereas *tell* highlights recipient-centered delivery or directive actions. In contrast, *speak* and *talk* are mainly used in intransitive constructions, typically combining with prepositional complements. Constructions such as *speak to/with NP* and *speak about NP* specify the Addressee and Topic of speech, while *talk to/with NP* and *talk about NP* explicitly mark the interlocutor and the shared topic of interaction. These syntactic patterns shift the communicative focus away from an object-like Message toward the relations between participants and the discourse topic, reflecting the verbs' inherently interactive orientation.

In summary, *say* and *tell*-through their transitive constructions- foreground the

Message or Addressee as syntactic objects, whereas *speak* and *talk*-through their intransitive constructions-emphasize interactional relationships and topical development. These differences in syntactic realization provide an important linguistic indicator of how each verb structurally encodes communicative events within the shared [Communication] frame.

3.5.4 Discourse functions

Although the four verbs *say*, *tell*, *speak*, and *talk* all belong to the [Communication] frame, their discourse functions differ markedly. First, *say* functions as a neutral reporting verb. It introduces both direct and indirect quotations (*He said, "I'm tired."/He said that he was tired.*), maintaining the flow of narration while minimizing the speaker's evaluative stance. This neutrality underscores *say*'s role in emphasizing the objectivity of message transmission within discourse. By contrast, *tell* performs both reporting and directive functions. As in *He told us to wait*, *tell* presupposes a specific addressee and combines information transfer with interpersonal force, expressing commands or instructions. Consequently, *tell* reinforces interpersonal engagement and authority within communication. Third, *speak* highlights the performative nature of the speech act. In *She spoke for an hour*, the focus is on the act of speaking itself rather than its propositional content; in *He speaks German well*, it conveys linguistic ability; and in *The president spoke about national security*, it denotes formal or ceremonial discourse. Thus, *speak* functions as a marker of formality and linguistic competence, emphasizing the speaker's role in structured or institutional contexts. Finally, *talk* foregrounds dialogic interaction. Examples such as *We talked for hours* emphasize reciprocity and informality, while *He talked about his experiences abroad* illustrates topical elaboration as a key discourse focus. *Talk* therefore plays a crucial role in representing collaborative discourse processes.

4. Discussion

The analysis in this study reveals that *say*, *tell*, *speak*, and *talk* all share the higher-level [Communication] frame, yet they differ significantly in the foregrounded Frame Elements and syntactic realizations. This indicates that these four verbs are not merely

a set of near-synonymous items but rather a functionally differentiated lexical group operating within a shared conceptual frame.

From a semantic perspective, *say* is a Message-foregrounding verb, specialized for the reporting of propositional content, with the Addressee functioning as an optional element. In contrast, *tell* is an Addressee -foregrounding verb, in which the presence of a recipient is obligatory, expressed through transfer or directive constructions. Although both belong to a subtype of the [Statement] frame, they differ in their focus on opposing FEs, which explains why these verbs are often confused by learners. Both *speak* and *talk* function syntactically as intransitive verbs, typically combining with prepositional phrases that indicate the Addressee, Topic, or Medium. However, *speak* emphasizes the speech act itself and the linguistic ability of the speaker, frequently occurring in formal or institutional contexts, whereas *talk* foregrounds interactivity and topic-sharing, being more frequent in informal, conversational settings. This distinction suggests that although both verbs relate to [Conversation] -type frames, *speak* and *talk* diverge in focus-one highlighting performativity, the other interactionality.

From a syntactic perspective, a clear contrast emerges between the transitive patterns of *say/tell* and the intransitive patterns of *speak/talk*. While *say* and *tell* mark the Message or Addressee directly through object complementation, *speak* and *talk* express these elements indirectly through prepositional phrases. This contrast demonstrates that even within a shared higher-level frame, differences in syntactic realization determine each verb's semantic focus and communicative function.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study confirms that Frame Semantics provides a powerful framework for explaining fine-grained distinctions among semantically related verbs. Traditional analyses have typically contrasted pairs such as *say* vs. *tell* or *speak* vs. *talk*. In contrast, this study offers an integrated, frame-based comparison of all four verbs, showing that each foregrounds a distinct FE within the same communicative structure. This supports the claim that FrameNet-style semantic description offers a coherent and empirically grounded method for explaining verb similarity and contrast.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings also have important implications. English learners often confuse *say* and *tell* due to syntactic differences, or *speak* and *talk* due to contextual variation. However, when explained from a Frame Semantics perspective, learners can understand not merely grammatical rules but the conceptual

focus of each verb—that is, *say* = Message-centered, *tell* = Addressee-centered, *speak* = Language /Act-centered, and *talk* = Interaction-centered. This approach helps learners systematically distinguish between the verbs and choose appropriately in context, reducing errors and enhancing communicative precision.

In sum, the discussion confirms that *say*, *tell*, *speak*, and *talk*, while all grounded in the shared [Communication] frame, diverge in semantic, syntactic, and discourse-functional dimensions through differential FE foregrounding and constructional constraints. This demonstrates that the frame-semantic explanation, which interprets verb meaning differences as selective foregrounding within a shared frame, provides a valid and insightful account of how English communication verbs structure meaning and discourse.

5. Conclusion

This study conducted a comparative analysis of the four representative English communication verbs—*say*, *tell*, *speak*, and *talk*—within the framework of Frame Semantics. The analysis revealed that while all four verbs share the higher-level [Communication] frame, they exhibit clear distinctions in their foregrounded Frame Elements (FEs) and syntactic realizations. Specifically, *say* is Message-centered, *tell* is Addressee-centered, *speak* is Act/Language-centered, and *talk* is Interaction/Topic-centered. These differences demonstrate that the four verbs are not mere synonyms but rather form a functionally differentiated lexical network within a shared semantic frame.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings confirm that Frame Semantics serves as an effective analytical tool for explaining fine-grained distinctions among semantically related verbs. By examining how each verb selectively foregrounds particular FEs, this study successfully explained the verbs' syntactic and discourse-functional variations, thereby integrating previously fragmented observations into a coherent explanatory framework.

From a pedagogical perspective, the study also provides important implications. English learners often confuse the usage of *say* and *tell* or *speak* and *talk*. This study shows that such confusion stems not merely from insufficient grammatical knowledge, but from a lack of understanding of which FE each verb foregrounds. Thus, teaching

these verbs through the conceptual framework of “Message vs. Addressee vs. Act vs. Interaction” can help learners develop a more systematic understanding of verb choice and improve their communicative accuracy in context.

Future research could extend this analysis to include other communication verbs such as *inform*, *notify*, *discuss*, and *mention*, or examine learner corpus data to analyze the error patterns of Korean learners in using these verbs. Moreover, a large-scale corpus-based quantitative study comparing usage across different speech contexts (e.g., formal vs. informal, spoken vs. written) would provide further empirical support and practical insights.

In conclusion, this study contributes to both verb semantics research and English language pedagogy by demonstrating how *say*, *tell*, *speak*, and *talk*, while sharing the same [Communication] frame, perform distinct semantic and discourse functions through selective FE foregrounding and syntactic constraints. These findings illustrate how a frame-semantic approach can offer a principled explanation of lexical differentiation within communication verbs, providing a valuable model for future studies of verb meaning and usage.

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