

ANALYSIS OF THE TRANSITIVE CONSTRUCTION IN SPEECH VERBS

ELENA RUIZ GIL¹
UNIVERSIDAD DE LA RIOJA

Abstract: *The main purpose of this paper is to make an analysis of the transitive construction in speech verbs. Our starting point is Faber and Mairal's (1999) classification of sixty-two verbs of speech. In our view, the semantic grounding of speech verbs is what determines the construction to which they are ascribed and the syntactic structure by means of which they are realised. We have approached this research from a cognitive standpoint. Thus, we will refer to two basic types of transitive construction, namely prototypical and non-prototypical. We will discuss this construction from both a syntactic and a semantic perspective. At the syntactic level, all the examples in our corpus present the same structure (S V O); nevertheless, at the semantic level we have been able to organise all our examples into three groups: (i) the prototypical transitive construction (where the object is directly affected by the action), (ii) the resultative construction (where the object arises as the result of the action of the verb), and (iii) the relational construction (where the object simply specifies the scope of the action; cf. Ruiz de Mendoza and Mairal, forthcoming, for similar views).*

Keywords: Speech verbs, transitive construction, Prototype Theory, resultative construction, relational construction.

Resumen: *El objetivo de este artículo es analizar la construcción transitiva en los verbos de habla. Nuestro punto de partida es la clasificación de Faber y Mairal (1999) de sesenta y dos verbos de habla. En nuestra opinión, la base semántica de los verbos de habla determina la construcción a la que éstos se adscriben y la estructura sintáctica por medio de la cual se realizan. Hemos realizado esta investigación desde un enfoque cognitivo. Por ello, haremos referencia a dos tipos básicos de construcción transitiva: prototípica y no prototípica. Estudiaremos esta construcción desde las perspectivas sintáctica y semántica. A nivel sintáctico, todos los ejemplos de nuestro corpus presentan la misma estructura (S V O); sin embargo, a nivel semántico hemos sido capaces de organizar todos nuestros ejemplos en tres grupos: (i) la construcción transitiva prototípica (en la que el objeto se ve directamente afectado por la acción), (ii) la construcción resultativa (en la que el objeto aparece como resultado de la acción del verbo), y (iii) la construcción relacional (en la que el objeto simplemente especifica el campo de la acción; cf. Ruiz de Mendoza y Mairal, en proceso, para ideas similares).*

Palabras clave: Verbos de habla, construcción transitiva, Teoría de los Prototipos, construcción resultativa, construcción relacional.

1. Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to make an analysis of the transitive construction in speech verbs. This paper constitutes a part of a wider research carried out in the domain of verbs of speech. In general, we are particularly interested in the relationship between syntax and semantics. In this sense, we believe that the semantic basis of speech verbs allows the language user to choose a specific grammatical construction in the production of messages; we also assume that linguistic form is subservient to conceptual structure.

The starting point of this research has been Faber and Mairal's (1999) classification of sixty-two verbs of speech². On the basis of this classification, we have created a corpus of analysis by means of online searches of the *British National Corpus* and six English

dictionaries³. Through a careful examination of the examples, we have noticed that speech verbs are ascribed to a variety of recurrent constructions such as the ditransitive construction, the intransitive construction, and the THAT-construction, among others, although for space limitations we will only focus on the transitive construction. Moreover, regarding the transitive construction we have realised that all the examples that appeared in our corpus following the pattern of this construction could be further classified into three different groups according to the semantic role played by the object in the sentence.

In our view, the semantic grounding of speech verbs is what determines the construction to which verbs are ascribed and the syntactic structure by means of which they are realised. We have approached this research from a cognitive standpoint; for this reason, we will refer to two basic types of transitive construction, namely prototypical and non-prototypical. We will basically discuss this construction from both a syntactic and a semantic perspective. At the syntactic level, all the examples in our corpus present the same structure (S V O⁴); nevertheless, at the semantic level we have been able to organise all our examples into three groups: (i) the prototypical transitive construction (e.g. *I didn't mean to insult you*), where the object is directly affected by the action, (ii) the resultative construction (e.g. *He whispered a word in my ear*), where the object arises as the result of the action of the verb, and (iii) the relational construction (e.g. *Someone might have guessed our secret*), where the object simply specifies the scope of the action (cf. Ruiz de Mendoza, 2005; Ruiz de Mendoza and Mairal, 2006, for similar views).

Our main thesis is that depending on the function of the object (O) at the semantic level, speech verbs will be ascribed to one of these three cases of transitive construction.

2. Theoretical framework: Prototype Theory

As we have indicated above, we have made use of some relevant analytical tools and categories derived from Cognitive Linguistics. More specifically, Prototype Theory has provided us with crucial criteria to perform a classification of the transitive construction in speech verbs. So first of all, we should reflect on the notion of *prototype*. What is a prototype? In Ungerer and Schmid (1996), we can find a brief and clear introduction to this theoretical notion. The authors dedicate the very first chapter to prototypes and categories. In the existing literature, prototypes have been defined as the mental representation we make of a category. Basically, a prototype can be defined as the *best* example of a category.

In Ungerer and Schmid, reference is made to a series of experiments which have been carried out concerning prototypes. The first steps towards the notion of prototype were taken by Berlin and Kay (1969) in their work on focal colours. Then, Eleanor Rosch (1973), after studying focal colours from a psychological perspective, carried out a number of prototype experiments regarding shapes. In addition, in 1975 she focused on colours and ten other categories (bird, fruit, vehicle, vegetable, sport, tool, toy, furniture, weapon, and clothing) in two separate experiments. Black (1949) also experienced with chairs, and Labov (1973) did the same regarding cups.

Rosch (1975: 198) presented American college students the following experiment. She took the word *red* as an example. The test instructions were as follows:

Close your eyes and imagine a true red. Now imagine an orangish red ... imagine a purple red. Although you might still name the orange red or the purple red with the term *red*, they are not as good examples of red (as clear cases of what *red* refers to) as the clear 'true' red. In short, some reds are redder than others. The same is true for other types of categories.

In fact, it is this last sentence that triggers the idea of analysing constructions in terms of prototypes. In this relation, we should first make reference to a previous study carried out by John R. Taylor (1995: 197-222), in which he regards "syntactic constructions as prototype categories". He actually pays special attention to the transitive construction, and provides eleven properties⁵ for a transitive construction to work as a prototypical case from a semantic perspective. Focusing on Taylor's views, our study departs from the possibility of classifying

different cases of the transitive construction in terms of goodness of example. However, we have not done so on the basis of experimental work (as it happened with the very first experiments on Prototype Theory just mentioned) since we are dealing with very abstract categories. Instead we have taken recourse to speaker's intuition and complementary linguistic clues obtained from careful contrast of corpus examples. We just advocate that as Rosch and other linguists found different cases of categories, we have distinguished different types of transitivity in our corpus of speech verbs. So our main hypothesis consists on the idea that Prototype Theory can be applied to the category of syntactic structures (syntax) and constructions. This turns to be in accordance with Taylor's (1995) work.

A next step is to ask ourselves what is the nature of cognitive categories. In this respect, in Ungerer and Schmid (1996: 19), we can find four aspects which they extract from the experiments carried out by Labov with cups:

- (i) Categories do not represent arbitrary divisions of the phenomena of the world, but should be seen as based on the cognitive capacities of the human mind.
- (ii) Cognitive categories of colours, shapes, but also of organisms and concrete objects, are anchored in conceptually salient prototypes, which play a crucial part in the formation of categories.
- (iii) The boundaries of cognitive categories are fuzzy, i.e. neighbouring categories are not separated by right boundaries, but merge into each other.
- (iv) Between prototypes and boundaries, cognitive categories contain members which can be rated on a typicality scale ranging from good to bad examples.

So let us turn now to the analysis of the transitive construction in verbs of speech, which will be treated in the next section.

3. The transitive construction in verbs of speech

Taking into consideration that a prototype is the *best* example of a category, what example of a transitive construction would come to our minds if we were asked to give one? Most probably we would think of an example of the type *John killed Peter*, *John kissed Mary*, and so on. The explanation of this phenomenon lies in the nature of the object complement; this will stand out as the main criterium we have selected for performing the classification of transitive speech verbs. Let us consider the following examples:

- (1) *John kissed Mary.*
- (2) *John built a house.*
- (3) *John has a car.*

These three constructions share the same syntactic attribute (pattern), that of S V O. The subject of the three examples is 'John', which is followed by a verb (i.e. a transitive verb), which is in turn followed by an object. Nevertheless, these three sentences differ in the semantic attribute of the object, i.e. the semantic role played by the object complement in the sentences. In (1) the object functions as an affected entity (i.e. patient), in (2) the object is considered as the result of the action, and in (3) the object is an already existing entity. But how does this distinction function in verbs of speech? Is this difference in the semantic role of the object maintained in the domain of speech? In the following section we will analyse a set of examples extracted from our corpus which prove to adapt to the distinction between prototypical and non-prototypical transitive verbs. We will explain through the use of linguistic examples what we understand by this classification.

3.1. Prototypical transitive construction

To begin with, we should deal with the features that a prototypical transitive construction presents. In our view, the transitive pattern should be approached both from a syntactic and a semantic perspective. At the syntactic level, prototypical transitive constructions present the

following structure: S V O. In the same fashion, at the semantic level, prototypical transitive constructions possess an object which plays the semantic role of *patient* (i.e. which receives the action of the verb). This would stand as the prototype for transitivity in our view.

We have found that this prototypical transitive construction is realised by means of a great number of speech verbs in our corpus; these are the following: *insult, address, ridicule, threaten, request, ask, inform, notify, praise, criticise, and telephone*. In them, the receiver of the communicative act is syntactically represented by the object which is affected by the action performed by the agent. This can be seen in the examples below:

- (4) *'I did not mean to insult you'* (CCLD).
- (5) *One of the newcomers boldly addressed John* (CCELD).
- (6) *... allowing them to ridicule her and never striking back* (CCLD).
- (7) *If you threaten me or use any force, I shall inform the police* (CCLD).
- (8) *They requested him to leave* (CCLD).
- (9) *I asked him his name* (CCLD).
- (10) *'I just added a little soy sauce', he informs us* (CCLD).
- (11) *She confirmed that she would notify the police and the hospital* (CCLD).
- (12) *At the end of your exercise, praise your dog* (BNC).
- (13) *I only criticise you and David* (BNC).
- (14) *Please, telephone the hotel of your choice to make your booking* (BNC).

In all these examples we can observe that the syntactic structure by which these speech verbs are realised conforms to the transitive pattern of S V O; actually, the object in all the examples appears right after the verb (and we indicate it in each example by highlighting the object not in italics). Besides maintaining the syntactic structure, all the verbs from (4) to (14) preserve the semantic role of the object, which is that of patient that receives the action of the verb. Indeed, in (4) the object of the sentence is 'insulted', in (5) it is 'addressed', in (6) it is 'ridiculed', in (7) it is 'threatened', in (8) it is 'requested', in (9) it is 'asked', in (10) it is 'informed', in (11) it is 'notified', in (12) it is 'praised', in (13) it is 'criticised', and in (14) it is 'telephoned'.

3.2. Non-prototypical transitive construction

3.2.1. Resultative construction

As it can be derived from the previous section, all those cases which do not exhibit the semantic properties of the prototypical construction, even if at the syntactic level they do, will be included in what we refer to as non-prototypical transitive construction. The first subtype of the non-prototypical transitive construction that we have detected in our corpus is the one that we designate as *resultative construction*. In this type of transitive construction there exists an action and a result. We will better understand the functioning of this theoretical construct by means of these examples:

- (15) *David built a house.*
- (16) *Peter sang a song.*
- (17) *Sarah painted a picture.*

A transitive (S V O) construction underlies these three examples; however, it is not the prototypical one which is composed of an agent (which functions as the subject) and a patient (which functions as the object of the action of the verb). Instead of a patient, in these examples we find that the object functions as the result of the action conveyed by the verb. So in (15) 'a house' is not the patient, it is the result of the action of 'building'; in (16) 'a song' is the natural consequence or the result of the action of 'singing'; in the same way, in (17) 'a painting' is the result of the action of 'painting'.

Basically, we should pose ourselves the question why resultative constructions inherit the basic syntactic pattern of a prototypical transitive construction like (i) *John killed Peter*, (ii) *John kicked Peter*, or (iii) *John kissed Mary* where the syntactic structure is represented by S V O. The answer to this question lies in metonymic motivation whereby the resultative construction discards the patient element while highlighting the resultative element of the action frame that is shared by the transitive and the resultative constructions. As a matter of fact, the metonymy underlying this process is ACTION FOR RESULT. Even in prototypical transitive linguistic expressions we can appreciate that the result of the action that the agent directs to the patient originates an implicit result; this factor is what motivates and licenses the metonymic shift from the prototypical transitive construction to the resultative construction. Consider thus examples (i) to (iii): in (i) the implicit result of the action is that Peter is 'killed'; in (ii) the implicit result of the action is that Peter is 'kicked'; and in (iii) the implicit result of the action is that Mary is 'kissed'. The result of the action is not explicitly expressed in the examples, neither Peter nor Mary are the result of the action. Compare these three examples with the following ones concerning speech verbs:

- (18) *He stated his views on the subject* (OALD).
- (19) *He declared his intention to fight the election* (CCELD).
- (20) *Maria turned bright red and stuttered a few words of apology* (CCELD).
- (21) *She stammered out a request* (CCELD).
- (22) *Repeat the word 'sit' to reinforce the dog's posture* (BNC).
- (23) *He whispered a word in my ear* (CCELD).
- (24) *The crowd marched down the road shouting slogans* (CCELD).

These eight examples illustrate the resultative construction found in our corpus of verbs of speech. As opposed to the three prototypical transitive examples where the result of the action is implicitly included, in these speech verb examples, the result of the action is explicitly expressed. This highlighting effect is thus the motivation for placing the result of the action right after the verb as if it were the patient of the action in a prototypical transitive construction. For instance, in (18), 'his views on the subject' are the result of the action of stating. As we have just mentioned, we can place the object ('his views on the subject') right after the verb *state* because its purpose is to emphasise the result of the action of stating. This same pattern is followed by the rest of speech verbs in examples from (19) to (24) where we find verbs such as *declare*, *stutter*, *stammer*, *repeat*, *whisper*, and *shout*. In (19) the result of the action of declaring is 'his intention to fight the election', in (20) the result of the action of stuttering is 'a few words of apology', in (21) the result of the action of stammering is 'a request', in (22) the result of the action of repeating is 'the word 'sit'', in (23) the result of the action of whispering is 'a word', and finally in (24) the result of the action of shouting are the shouted 'slogans'.

We can classify within this resultative construction system a great number of verbs of speech which follow the same structure as verbs from examples (18) to (24); these verbs are the following: *address*, *state*, *declare*, *whisper*, *agree*, *acknowledge*, *promise*, *order*, *ask*, *repeat*, *stammer*, *stutter*, *shout*, *specify*, *emphasise*, *mention*, *repeat*, *guarantee*, *suggest*, and *request*. For the sake of brevity we are not going to provide an explanation of all the verbs that are ascribed to this construction because they follow the same pattern as the previous examples we have commented on.

In sum, the resultative construction represents a variant of the prototypical transitive construction that is licensed by a metonymic extension of the ACTION FOR RESULT kind. Additionally, although the resultative construction inherits and maintains the transitive syntactic structure S V O, it does not preserve the semantic configuration but it changes and modifies it. Instead of containing an object functioning as a patient, the resultative construction possesses an object which refers to the result of the action (i.e. the natural consequence of the action of the verb).

3.2.2. Relational construction

In this section we propose another variant of the non-prototypical transitive construction examined above. As in the case of the resultative transitive construction where we find the result as the object of the action, we postulate that there exist certain verbs of speech which are ascribed to a special type of transitive construction that we call *relational construction*. But in this case, and opposed to the resultative construction, the object specifies the scope of the action, and is not a patient, as is the case with prototypical transitive constructions. Similarly, Taylor (1995: 209) states that "Still further removed from the prototype are transitive sentences which describe a relation between entities, not some action performed by one entity with respect to another". Taylor uses the following examples to illustrate it: *John resembles his brother* and *The book costs \$20*.

We will show that the prototypical transitive syntactic structure which consists of a subject (which plays the semantic role of agent of the action) and an object (which plays the semantic role of patient), S V O, is inherited, but not that of the semantic structure since the semantic role of patient is not realised by the object, as we will demonstrate in the examples below.

- (25) *Tom has a car.*
 (26) *I owe you money.*

In both examples, the objects of the sentences do not play the semantic role of patient. In (25) the object 'a car' is not affected by the action of the subject and neither does example (26). Furthermore, it is interesting to compare these two examples to the other case of non-transitive construction (i.e. that which presents the result as the object of the action of the verb). In resultative constructions, the object of the verb is seen as a natural consequence of the action of the verb; on the contrary, in relational constructions, the objects already exist before the action of the verb is performed. For example, in (25) the car existed before John 'had' it, the car is not a consequence or a result of John having it. In (26) it happens similarly, the money existed before the speaker 'owed' it to the addressee.

Now that we have distinguished between both non-prototypical transitive constructions (resultative and relational), we should proceed to illustrate the latter in the domain of verbs of speech. These verbs are the following: *accept, acknowledge, admit, reject, praise, extol, refuse, guess, answer, describe, outline, emphasise, discuss, mention, and lament*. By way of illustration consider these examples:

- (27) *'But I accept the referee's decision'* (BNC).
 (28) *Even his opponents acknowledge his tenacity* (BNC).
 (29) *He laments the changing pattern of life in the countryside* (CCELD).
 (30) *Now experts are extolling the virtues of the humble potato* (CCLD).
 (31) *The patient has the right to refuse treatment* (CCLD).
 (32) *Penny decided not to mention her cold* (CCELD).
 (33) *Someone might have guessed our secret* (CCLD).
 (34) *In the south, those who reject communism seek to escape, preferably to America through the "orderly departure program"* (BNC).

These eight examples illustrate the use of a non-prototypical transitive construction; we claim that it is a non-prototypical transitive construction because in these examples the semantic role of patient is not maintained, and the object does not play either the semantic role of result. We have highlighted the object of each sentence not indicating it in italics. In (27) the syntactic element of object 'the referee's decision' does not function semantically as the patient of the action of accepting, as happens with the rest of examples from (28) to (34). We have included all these examples to corroborate and illustrate how this construction functions. All the object

examples can be explained in the same way as example (27), they refer to entities that exist before the action performed by the verb is realised (so these speech verbs do not belong to the paradigm of speech verbs that are ascribed to the resultative construction). And as we keep demonstrating, they do not either maintain the semantic structure of patient object that we find in prototypical transitive constructions. In essence, the speech verbs which are ascribed to the relational construction inherit the syntactic configuration of the prototypical transitive-construction, but not its semantic structure.

4. Conclusion

The main conclusions of this study can be summarised as follows. First, the semantic grounding of speech verbs is what determines the construction to which they are ascribed and the syntactic structure by means of which they are realised. Second, depending on the function of the object (O) at the semantic level, speech verbs will be ascribed to a specific type of transitive construction. Third, Prototype Theory proves useful to explain the motivation of the existence of three different types of transitive construction (from more prototypical to less prototypical); this can be seen in accordance to Taylor's (1995) analysis on transitivity. In this relation, it could be said that the nature of the object complement lies at the basis of the phenomenon of prototypicality (it actually allows us to distinguish the different types of transitivity). Finally, it is the semantic role played by the object that determines the type of transitive construction to which speech verbs are ascribed. At the syntactic level, the three cases of transitive structure present the same pattern: S V O.

Notes

¹ Financial support for this research has been provided by the Government of La Rioja (grant FPI-2004) and by the DGI, Spanish Ministry of Education and Science (grants HUM2004-05947-C02-01/FILO and HUM2005-02870/FILO). The research has been co-financed through FEDER funds.

² Faber and Mairal's (1999) classification of speech verbs can be found in appendix I. This classification of speech verbs has been performed following a functional lexematics approach in order to determine a set of lexical domains of speech.

³ The six English dictionaries consulted in this study are the following:

- CCELD *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* (1995).
- CCLD *Collins Cobuild Learner's Dictionary* (1996).
- LDEL *Longman Dictionary of the English Language* (1988).
- OALD *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (1989).
- RDWPD *Reader's Digest Word Power Dictionary* (2001).
- OSD *Oxford Spanish Dictionary* (1994).

⁴ These abbreviations will be constantly used throughout the paper, and they refer to syntactic categories of the sentence (S: subject, V: verb, and O: object). The verb in this construction will always be transitive.

⁵ Taylor has drawn these eleven semantic properties from Lakoff (1997) and Hopper and Thompson (1980). According to Taylor (1995: 206-207) they are the following:

- (a) The construction describes events involving two, and only two participants, encoded by the subject and direct object NPs respectively.
- (b) The two participants are highly individuated, i.e. they are discrete, specific entities (from this it follows that both the NPs in the construction have specific reference), distinct both from each other, and from the background environment.
- (c) The event is initiated by the referent of the subject NP, i.e. by the agent. Responsibility for the event thus lies exclusively with the agent. Furthermore, the subject NP is the sentence topic; the subject is what the sentence is about.
- (d) The agent acts consciously and volitionally, and thus controls the event. Since consciousness and volition are typically human attributes, it follows that the agent is typically a human being.

- (e) As a consequence of the agent's action, something happens to the patient, i.e. the referent of the object NP. The effect on the patient is intended by the agent. Often, though by no means necessarily, the patient is inanimate.
- (f) After the occurrence of the event, the patient is in a different state from before the event. Usually, the difference is one which would be highly perceptible to an onlooking observer.
- (g) The event is construed as punctual. Even though the event necessarily has temporal extension, the internal structure of the event, and the intermediate states between its inception and termination, are not in focus.
- (h) The agent's action on the patient usually involves direct physical contact, and the effect on the patient is immediate.
- (i) The event has a causative component--the agent's action causes the patient to undergo a change.
- (j) Typically, agent and patient are not only clearly differentiated entities; often they also stand in an adversative relationship.
- (k) Finally, the events reported by the construction are real, not imaginary, hypothetical, or counterfactual. Hence, central instantiations of the construction are realis.

So for Taylor this is the semantic characterisation of the prototypical transitive construction. Nonetheless, as it can be appreciated throughout our study, we have not paid special attention to Taylor's eleven properties into our analysis of the semantic aspect of transitive constructions, only at a general level.

Appendix I

Speech [*say, speak, talk*]

A. To say something in a particular way

1. To say something formally [*address, state, declare*]
2. To say something informally [*gossip, chat*]
3. To say something firmly [*insist, emphasise*]
4. To say something precisely [*specify*]
5. To say something briefly [*mention*]
6. To say something again [*repeat*]
7. To say something with difficulty [*stutter, stammer*]
8. To say something quickly/continuously [*chatter, babble*]
9. To say something suddenly/loudly [*exclaim, shout*]
10. To say something in a soft way [*whisper*]
11. To say something angrily [*snarl*]
12. To say something unhappily in a dissatisfied way [*complain, lament*]
13. To say something in a proud way [*boast, brag*]
14. To say something in a rude way [*insult*]

B. To say something

1. To say something is the case (positive things)
 - 1.1 To say yes to somebody/something [*accept, agree*]
 - 1.2 To say that something is true [*acknowledge, admit*]
 - 1.2.1. To say something will happen [*foretell, predict*]
 - 1.2.2. To say that something is certain [*promise, guarantee*]
 - 1.3 To say positive things about somebody/something
 - 1.3.1. To say positive things, speaking favorably [*praise, extol*]
 - 1.3.2. To say positive things, saying that something should be considered [*suggest, advise*]
2. To say something is not the case (negative things)
 - 2.1 To say no to somebody/something [*refuse, reject*]
 - 2.2 To say negative things about somebody/something [*criticise, slander*]
 - 2.2.1. To say negative things so that others will laugh [*ridicule*]
 - 2.3 To say something bad may happen [*warn, threaten*]
3. To say something without knowing if it is the case [*guess*]

- C. To say something for a particular purpose/ with a specific result
1. To say something to somebody so that they will do it [*direct, order*]
 - 1.1 To say something to somebody else to put an idea in their mind [*suggest*]
 2. To say something in order to get something else [*ask, request*]
 - 2.1 To say something in question form in order to get an answer [*ask, question*]
 - 2.1.1. To say something in return to something [*answer*]
 - 2.1.2. To say something not in return to something [*remark, comment*]
 3. To say something to somebody to tell them about it
 - 3.1 To say something expressing an opinion or judgement one has arrived at [*reason*]
 - 3.2 To say something to somebody so that they will remember it [*remind*]
 - 3.3 To say something to somebody so that they will know it [*inform, notify*]
 - 3.4 To say something to somebody giving an account of it [*describe*]
 - 3.5 To say the main points of [*outline*]
 - 3.6 To say something to somebody else, talking it over from several points of view [*discuss*]
- D. To say something by a particular means [*telephone*]
- E. To say something in a different language [*translate*]

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