

The question was:

How do I use *say*, *speak*, *talk* and *tell*?



Say what you like

Tell me why

Talk to me

Speak up

Meaning:

These four verbs are related in meaning but with important differences. All of them refer to communication of some kind.

- 1) *say* has three meanings:
 - a) to pronounce words or sounds
I said the word aloud for her
 - b) to state a fact:
He said the train is late
 - c) to express an opinion
I say that's wrong
- 2) *speak* has three meanings:
 - a) to say words
Please speak more slowly
 - b) to give a prepared talk or speech
She is speaking at the conference
 - c) to have a conversation
She spoke to me after the meeting
- 3) *talk* has two meanings:
 - a) to say words
Please talk more quietly
 - b) to have a conversation
I need to talk to you today
- 4) *tell* has two meanings:
 - a) to give information (spoken or written):
His letter tells me he's arriving today
He told me the answer
 - b) to order
He told me to leave

(It is worth noting that hostage negotiators and those charged with interacting with potential suicides have learned not to use *talk* but to prefer *speak*. This is because *talk* implies a one-way phenomenon but *speak* implies a more equal and participatory event. Therefore:

I want to speak to you

is far less threatening than:

I want to talk to you.)

Form:

Because translation is difficult with these words, they cause a good deal of difficulty for learners. We need to look at the grammar of the words and how they are used.

say

is always a transitive verb but the objects it takes are slightly anomalous:

- we allow direct speech to be the object:
He said, "Good morning"
- we allow the description of a communicative function to be the object
He said good morning
He said that's different
- we allow a verb phrase to be nominalised as the object:
He said that he was leaving today
- we allow an inanimate noun phrase as the object if it refers to something one can say:
He said his prayers
He said it aloud
- we do **not** allow an inanimate object if the verb means *read aloud*:
**He said the poem*
- we do **not** allow the verb to take an animate object:
**He said Mary*
**He said her*
- we do **not** allow an intransitive use (**unless** the object is clearly omitted because it is understood):
**She said*
**I have said*
**Who is saying?*

speak

is a verb which can be transitive or intransitive but, again, the objects it takes are anomalous:

- we allow an inanimate noun phrase as the object only if it refers to words or language:
He spoke the words
He spoke German
I don't speak the language
- we allow the verb to operate intransitively:
She spoke loudly to me
I have spoken
Will you speak at the meeting?
- we do not allow an inanimate object if the verb means *read aloud*:
**He spoke the poem*
- we do not allow direct speech to be the object:
**He spoke, "Good morning"*
- we do **not** allow a verb phrase to be nominalised as the object:
He spoke that he was leaving today
- we do **not** allow the verb to take an animate object:
**He spoke Mary*
**He spoke her*
- and must use a prepositional phrase with *to*:
He spoke to Mary
He spoke to her

talk

is always intransitive

- we allow only intransitive uses:
She talked persuasively
They talked for hours
Will you talk at the conference?
- we must use a prepositional phrase to introduce any reference to what the talking was about or to
He talked to Mary
They talked about the programme
They talked in German
- we allow only a language to appear to be the object of the verb but then it acts as an adverbial rather than the direct object:
They talked French together (meaning in French)
- we do **not** allow true transitive use:
**They talked me*
**They talked the book*
**She talked the meeting*
**She talked the poem*
- we do not allow a verb phrase to be a nominalised object:
**He talked that he was happy*
**She is talking that she will leave soon*

tell

is always transitive and sometimes ditransitive (see below for more)

- we allow an inanimate noun-phrase object:
He told a story
He told a lie
- we allow ditransitive use with an animate indirect object and a noun-phrase direct object:
He told the children a story
She told me the truth
- we allow ditransitive use with an animate indirect object and a nominalised verb-phrase direct object, usually as reported speech:
He told her that he was going home
She told me where she got the book
- we allow a single direct animate object **only if** the indirect object (a noun phrase or nominalised verb phrase) is understood:
She told the police (about something)
They told us (about something)
- we only allow the *to*-infinitive as a nominalised object in the sense of *order*:
They told me to go home
- we allow direct speech to be the object:
He told me, "That's the train you want."
- we do **not** allow a nominalised verb-phrase object without an indirect object:
**She told that she was leaving*
**They told to go away*
**They told how to do it*
- we do **not** allow an intransitive use (**even if** the object is clearly omitted because it is understood):
**She told*

Function

When we look at how we can use the words the picture is difficult but not impossible to learn or teach, providing we don't try to do it all at once.

It looks like this:

		say	speak	talk	tell
function	<i>example</i>				
orders	<i>I told him to do the work</i>				✓
exclamations	<i>"Wow!" he said</i>	✓			
questions	<i>"Where are you going?" I said</i>	✓			
direct speech	<i>"Hi," she said</i> <i>"My name's Anne," she told me</i>	✓			✓
indirect speech	<i>She said her name was Anne</i> <i>She told me her name was Anne</i>	✓			✓
giving information	<i>He told me where he lived</i> <i>He said it was a long way away</i>	✓			✓
languages	<i>He speaks German</i> <i>They talked French to her mother</i>		✓	✓	
grammar	<i>example</i>				
with a direct object	<i>He said the word in French</i> <i>She spoke the sentence aloud</i> <i>They told a direct lie</i>	✓	✓		✓
with no object	<i>The parrot can talk</i> <i>They were speaking</i>		✓	✓	
with to + an object	<i>He talked to all the workers</i> <i>She spoke to her mother</i> <i>That is what he said to me</i>	✓	✓	✓	
with about + an object	<i>He talked about his experience</i> <i>She spoke about her hometown</i> <i>They told me about the problems</i>		✓	✓	¹ ✓
with a nominalised clause	<i>He told me where to go</i> <i>She told us what to do</i> <i>She said where she was going</i>	✓			¹ ✓
with two objects	<i>I told the children a story</i>				✓

¹ Only when an indirect object is present. We allow, for example:

She told us where to put the luggage

but not:

**She told where to put the luggage*