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# PPs, particles and polysemy of a basic Swedish speech act verb

Niclas Burenhult

## Introduction

Every language has a set of verbs which denote the various actions we perform when we communicate through spoken language. In linguistic literature, these are commonly referred to as speech act verbs and they typically include communicative categories like asking, answering, promising, accusing, telling and a host of others. Most speech act verbs have very specific meanings which limit their usage to narrow communicative contexts and certain specialised categories of the speech act domain. However, the speech act domain also includes a small number of commonly used verbs which may be regarded as more basic, less specialised and more versatile. They appear in a variety of contexts and thus exhibit a more complex pattern of polysemy than other speech act verbs. Typical English examples include *say*, *speak* and *talk*. Based on 4000+ concordances from several corpora of different genres, the present study attempts to chart the polysemy of one such basic speech act verb in Swedish: *tala*.

## *Previous research and speech act classification*

Speech acts have been a subject of great scholarly attention since the publication of Austin's *How to do things with words* (1962). Much of the literature has been largely theoretical, and classifications of the speech act domain as a whole seldom rest on detailed analyses of the individual verbs. One notable and ambitious exception is put forward by Wierzbicka 1987, who classifies a substantial number of English speech act verbs into 37 groups by means of definitions in the form of so-called *reductive paraphrases*, i.e. a few simple, descriptive sentences with a minimal and standardised lexicon. Each reductive paraphrase is followed by a detailed discussion and clarification of the verb and paraphrase in question.

Several in-depth studies have been carried out which focus on one particular speech act verb. For an account of English *ask* for example, see Rudzka-Ostyn 1989. Also, recent text-based work on a limited group of speech act verbs in Italian has been carried out within the DELIS project (Heid et al. 1996:52-62). This work, some of which is also presented in Corazzari et al. 1996, is primarily concerned with the identification of the role inventory of speech act verbs on the basis of syntactic and semantic criteria, and it includes among others an analysis of *dire* ('say' or 'tell'). As we shall see, the semantic and syntactic environments identified in the DELIS study of Italian speech act verbs are similar to those that will be presented here.

Contrastive studies of various classes of verbs, including verbs of motion, perception and possession, have been carried out within the project *Crosslinguistic lexicology* at the Department of Linguistics and Phonetics at Lund University. For analyses of verbs of motion, see Viberg 1996.

### *Text corpora and the classification of concordances*

The data presented in this article are drawn from the extensive text corpora of modern Swedish that are available at the Language Bank of Swedish, which is maintained by the Department of Linguistics at Gothenburg University<sup>1</sup>. A total of 4,142 concordance lines involving various tense forms of *tala* were imported into FileMaker Pro documents. Each instance of *tala* formed a separate entry in these documents, and various classificatory fields were then created for detailed systematisation of the instances. The primary purpose of this classification was to survey the range of possible syntactic environments that exist in connection with *tala*, and also to identify the semantic properties of its complements and subjects.

In addition to the infinitive form *tala*, the study involved concordance lines of three inflected, tense-indicating forms: present *talar*, preterite *talade* and supine *talat*. Swedish verbs are not inflected for person or number, so these forms cover all kinds of subjects. Also, concordance lines were extracted from texts of several different genres available at the Language Bank of Swedish, including modern novels, daily newspapers, parliamentary debates, and (to a limited extent) words of Acts.

### What's *tala* in English?

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<sup>1</sup>The corpora used in the present study have been selected from the Modern Swedish Texts section of the Language Bank of Swedish, Gothenburg University, and include *Press* 87, *Novels* 1980-81, *Legal text* and *Parliamentary debates* 1978-79.

Before I try to answer this question I should perhaps elaborate a little on the concept of ‘basic’ speech act verbs. In the DELIS project mentioned above, the Italian verb *dire* was picked out for analysis on the grounds that it forms “the more general verb in the field, somehow representing the field itself”. The English equivalent of *dire* is *say* and the Swedish equivalent is *säga*, both of which have the same general meaning as their Italian counterpart. Clearly, all speech act verbs can be subcategorised under these basic terms because speech always involves the act of ‘saying’ something.

English *speak* and *talk* also have a very general meaning, although there are slightly different senses between them. Perhaps the most illuminating account of this difference is that of Wierzbicka 1987:381, who concludes that *talking* is necessarily dialogically oriented whereas *speaking* normally consists in monologising. Even if only one speaker is doing all the talking, it is suggested that his attitude is still dialogical because “he is trying to communicate with a particular addressee, and he assumes that the addressee would want to know what the speaker wants to say”.

Etymologically related to English *talk* and *tell*, *tala* (together with *säga*) forms the most basic speech act verb in Swedish. The distinction upheld in English between monologically oriented *speak* and dialogically oriented *talk* does not exist in Swedish, as both would be translated as *tala*. *Tala* can be readily combined with certain prepositional phrases, noun phrases and stressed verbal particles, which specialise its meaning and extend its use into various subfields of the speech act domain.

## Constructions and polysemy

In the following subsections, the instances of *tala* have been organised according to the syntactic environments in which they appear. The semantic role terminology used follows the one proposed by Heid et al. 1996:52, 55 and includes SENDER, ADDRESSEE, BENEFACTIVE, MESSAGE, TOPIC and CONTENT-OBJECT. To this set of roles I suggest for *tala* the addition of LANGUAGE-OBJECT and ARGUMENTATIVE. Comments are also made on the frequency of different constructs (table 1).

### *Tala without complement*

Most often, *tala* appears in combination with a complement whose role is intimately linked to the verb, in the sense that it has a significant influence on the meaning of the verb, usually in the form of some kind of object. As we shall see later on, this object is most commonly represented by a noun phrase or a prepositional phrase. Sometimes *tala* is supplemented by a stressed verbal

particle which specifies its meaning. However, there is a number of instances in which one cannot identify such an intimate complement. Some 11 percent of the total number of instances analysed have been assigned to this category. It should be noted here that most instances involving only PPs with a locative or temporal content, for instance, have been classified as ‘without complement’, since these cannot normally be considered to have any significant influence on the meaning of the verb.

In spite of the lack of complements, it is possible on the basis of context alone to discern at least three slightly different meanings of *tala* in this category. One is the very general meaning representing the whole field of verbal communication, the one used to describe the act of producing spoken language, neatly illustrated in the following examples:

även om han inte kan tala kan han kommunicera med omvärlden  
 ‘although he cannot speak he can communicate with the world around’

Idag kan han gå och har lärt sig tala  
 ‘Today he can walk and has learnt to speak’

The other two meanings were touched upon in the previous section with regard to the monological and dialogical orientation of the verb. As noted, Swedish *tala* has both monological and dialogical uses. A monological use of *tala* without a complement involves speaking before an audience and is synonymous to ‘make a speech’:

han reste runt i skolorna och talade  
 ‘he went to different schools and made speeches’

Anton Nilsson talar.  
 ‘Anton Nilsson is making a speech’.

The dialogical use, translated as ‘talk’, ‘converse’ or ‘chat’, is exemplified in:

Vi sitter och talar i en gammal, rucklig träkåk  
 ‘We sit (here) and talk in an old, ramshackle house’

In addition, there is quite a large number of homogeneous idiomatic expressions involving the perfect form *talat* which the speaker uses to describe his or her own utterance. They are sometimes paralleled by English ‘speaking’ or ‘put’ and include among others *bildligt talat* ‘figuratively speaking’, *bokstavligt talat* ‘literally speaking’, *ärligt talat* ‘to tell the truth’, and *milt talat* ‘mildly put’.

**Table 1.** General classification of instances of *tala*.

<i>Syntactic environment</i>	<i>Semantic role of complement</i>	<i>Proportion of total no of instances</i>
<i>tala</i> without complement	—	11%
<i>tala</i> + NP	MESSAGE TOPIC LANGUAGE-OBJECT ADDRESSEE	5%
<i>tala</i> + PP	ADDRESSEE BENEFACTIVE ARGUMENTATIVE TOPIC LANGUAGE-OBJECT	67%
<i>tala</i> + particle	Various	10%
Indeterminable ( <i>tala</i> + PP or particle)	Various	7%

*Tala combined with a NP*

About 5 percent of the total number of instances of *tala* involve a complement in the form of a noun phrase. This may be perceived as a direct object and thus gives *tala* a transitive appearance. At least four different subgroups of such NPs can be identified.

**MESSAGE NPs.** Some NPs may be regarded to carry the semantic component of MESSAGE (for Italian, see Heid et al. 1996:57). In Swedish, these NPs usually take the form of abstract nouns without articles, e.g. *tala allvar/allvarsord* ‘have a serious talk’, literally ‘talk seriousness’; *tala förstånd* ‘make someone see reason’ literally ‘talk reason’; *tala klarspråk/klartext* ‘make things plain’, literally ‘talk clear language’; and *tala sanning* ‘tell the truth’. The nouns are closely linked to the verb, and if anything the verb and noun together form a lexicalised phrase, hence the ‘naked’ nature of the nouns. MESSAGE NPs can be followed by an ADDRESSEE PP headed by the preposition *med*, and/or sometimes by a TOPIC PP headed by *om*.

There is another set of NPs which may also be assigned to this category. These are NPs involving the noun *ord* (‘word’ or ‘words’) and an adjectival specifier, e.g. *tala bittra ord* ‘say bitter words’, ‘lament’; *tala lögnaktiga ord* ‘say untruthful words’, ‘lie’; and *tala vackra ord* ‘say beautiful words’, ‘praise’. They are normally followed by a TOPIC PP headed by *om*.

*TOPIC NPs.* The second subgroup of NPs are those that can be referred to as TOPICS. These are very homogeneous in that they always involve an indefinite noun without any form of article. In this way they are quite similar to the naked MESSAGE nouns described above, but whereas MESSAGE nouns are restricted in number and meaning and are part of a limited set of lexicalised phrases, TOPIC nouns exhibit no apparent limitations as to what they mean. The noun can be either abstract or concrete, and may denote virtually anything that can be a topic of a conversation or a speech. The construct has an obvious English parallel in phrases like ‘talk business’ or ‘talk politics’, and examples that have been found in the corpora include *tala militaria* ‘talk militaria’; *tala trädgård* ‘talk gardening’, literally ‘talk garden’; *tala kvinnoproblem* ‘talk lady problems’; *tala ledarskap* ‘talk leadership’; *tala musikkarriär* ‘talk musical career’; *tala politik* ‘talk politics’; and *tala värderingar* ‘talk values’.

The function of a TOPIC NP is essentially identical to that of a TOPIC PP (see below). Like the TOPIC PP, the TOPIC NP can be followed by an ADDRESSEE PP.

*LANGUAGE-OBJECT NPs.* The third subgroup of NPs involve a semantic role which is neither MESSAGE nor TOPIC. For lack of a better option, they have been tentatively assigned to a LANGUAGE-OBJECT category. This is because these NPs always denote language as such, either a particular language or a style of speech. Thus we have *tala engelska* ‘speak English’, *tala franska* ‘speak French’, *tala hebreiska* ‘speak Hebrew’ and *tala samma språk* ‘speak the same language’, as well as *tala ett rent och klart språk* ‘speak properly and plainly’, literally ‘speak a proper and plain language’. Unlike many of the MESSAGES and TOPICS described above, LANGUAGE-OBJECTS often consist of very complex NPs with articles:

Han talar en elegant och fullkomligt oemotståndlig gammaldags ryska  
 ‘He speaks (an) elegant and completely irresistible old-fashioned Russian’

LANGUAGE-OBJECTS can be supplemented with an ADDRESSEE PP headed by the preposition *med*:

Som liten lärde hon sig tala shona med lekkamraterna.  
 ‘As a child she learnt to speak Shona to her playmates.’

*ADDRESSEE NPs.* The fourth and last subgroup of NPs to be discussed here involve human (or animate) nouns which in part can be described as ADDRESSEES. These represent only a handful of instances, all of which are followed by the oblique PP *till rätta* ‘to reason’:



Först försökte jag tala kräket till rätta.  
 ‘First I tried to bring the beast to reason’

It should be mentioned in connection with these human object roles that there is also a small number of expressions with objects in the form of reflexive pronouns, like *tala sig hes* ‘talk oneself hoarse’, *tala sig varm [för saken]* ‘warm up to one’s subject’ and *tala oss samman* ‘talk ourselves together’. In the latter case, at least, the reflexive pronoun may be interpreted as an ADDRESSEE, but the former two instances may form a separate category of physiologically related expressions with resultative adjectives, paralleled by e.g. *springa sig trött*, literally ‘run oneself tired’.

#### *Tala combined with a PP*

By far the most common construct found in combination with *tala* is a prepositional phrase. I have assigned exactly two-thirds of the total number of instances to this environment. Tense and genre have no significant bearing on the proportion of *tala* instances with PP complements in relation to the total number of instances. They invariably make up around two-thirds of the total in all corpora. The corpus of words of Acts is an exception, with a meagre number of 18 instances of *tala*, none of which has a PP complement.

Note that for a PP to be assigned to this category it is required that it denotes the semantic role of either an ADDRESSEE, a BENEFACTIVE, an ARGUMENTATIVE or a TOPIC. Instances of *tala* in combination with PPs with a locative or temporal content, for example, have with few exceptions not been assigned to this category unless they also have any of the required PP types.

It should also be pointed out that in numerous cases the complement of *tala* consists of more than one PP. For instance, an ADDRESSEE PP may be followed by a TOPIC PP, or vice versa. These instances have been classified according to which kind of PP is found closest to *tala*.

*ADDRESSEE PPs.* These consist of a preposition followed by a human noun. At least two prepositions turn up in this environment: *med* (literally ‘with’ but in combination with *tala* translated as ‘to’) and *till* ‘to’. A PP complement involving *med* makes *tala* dialogically oriented, and one involving *till* renders a more monological interpretation. This distinction is reflected in the following examples, where *tala med* is translated into English as dialogical ‘talk to’ and *tala till* as monological ‘speak to’ or ‘address’:

Sara talar med Anna  
 ‘Sara is talking to Anna’  
 han talar till folket  
 ‘he addresses/speaks to the people’

There are some other prepositions that can occasionally be given a similar interpretation, e.g. *inför* ‘before’, ‘in the presence of’, as in:

I våras talade statsminister Göran Persson inför LO:s representantskap.  
 ‘Last spring prime minister Göran Persson spoke before the representative assembly of the Labour Union.’

*BENEFACTIVE PPs.* There is a small number of PPs headed by the preposition *för* ‘for’, containing a NP with a human noun which may be regarded as BENEFACTIVES:

vi talar för alla våra 600 000 kamrater  
 ‘we speak for all our 600 000 comrades’

The opposite role of BENEFACTIVES would be represented by PPs containing a human NP and the preposition *mot* ‘against’, tentatively labelled MALFACTIVES, but no clear cases have been found.

*ARGUMENTATIVE PPs.* The majority of PPs headed by *för* and (*e*)*mot*, however, may be assigned to a separate group of PPs labelled ARGUMENTATIVES. These may contain either a NP (usually with a non-human noun) or a *that*-clause.

jag har [...] talat för att det behövs energiska åtgärder  
 ‘I have [...] argued that there is a need of vigorous measures’

It is very common for this particular construct to have a non-human subject which gives *tala för* the metaphorical interpretation ‘point towards’ or ‘indicate’:

starka skäl talar för att det handlar om ett politiskt mord  
 ‘strong arguments indicate that it is a question of assassination’

Only a small number of ARGUMENTATIVE PPs are headed by the preposition *mot* ‘against’.

Carlsson talade mot våldet  
 ‘Carlsson spoke against the violence’

*TOPIC PPs.* Three-quarters of the instances involving *tala* + PP (nearly half of the total number of instances) have TOPIC PPs, the vast majority of which are headed by the preposition *om* ‘about’. Less frequent prepositions include *i* ‘in’, *på* ‘on’, *kring* ‘around’ and *under* ‘under’. *Om* can be combined with a NP, a *that*-clause or a *wh*-clause:

Inte bara fiskare talar om metmask.  
 ‘Not only anglers talk about angling-worms.’

Ni har talat om att sänka skatterna  
 ‘You have talked about reducing taxes’

Sture Ericson talade om hur länge en utredning skall sitta.  
 ‘Sture Ericson spoke about how long a committee should serve.’

The remaining four prepositions are usually combined only with particular NPs denoting topics, as in *tala i ämnet ...*, *tala på temat ...* and *tala kring ämnet ...* ‘speak on the subject of ...’, as well as *tala under rubriken ...* ‘speak under the heading of ...’. A fifth possible preposition in this context is *över* ‘over’, as in the rather formal and obsolete *tala över ämnet ...* ‘speak on the subject of ...’, but no such construct has been found in the corpora studied.

*LANGUAGE-OBJECT PPs.* The corpora have a few examples of PPs consisting of the preposition *på* ‘on’ and a noun denoting language as such. Including examples like *tala på tyska* ‘speak [in] German’ and *tala på engelska* ‘speak [in] English’, these instances are equivalents of those noun phrases which we labelled LANGUAGE-OBJECT NPs.

#### *Tala combined with a stressed verbal particle*

Distinguishing between a preposition and a verbal particle in written Swedish texts can sometimes be a difficult task. In spoken language, particles (unlike prepositions) are stressed, and hence very easy to identify. In written text it is possible in most cases to determine which item belongs to which category on the basis of the context in which it appears, but in a fairly large number of instances this is unfeasible, especially in several cases involving the prepositions/particles *för* ‘for’ and *om* ‘about’. It might be expected that the author of a written text would try to avoid such ambiguity by keeping the context clear, and most of the ambiguous examples do indeed turn up in those corpora that are based to some extent on spoken language (parliamentary debates). These ambiguous instances (287 in number) have been classified as ‘indeterminable’ and have not been subject to further study. However, I would expect that the proportions of PP and particle complements in these

indeterminable cases would equal those of the corresponding classifiable instances, which would mean that almost 90 percent of the indeterminables are represented by PPs and the remaining ten percent by particles.

Stressed verbal particles provide the most effective means of altering and specifying the semantic content of the host verb. *Tala* in combination with some particular particle might in fact be treated as a separate verb, with its own complements in the form of PPs, *that*-clauses, *wh*-clauses, NPs etc. Eight different particles have surfaced in the corpora – *(e)mot*, *för*, *igenom*, *in*, *ner*, *om*, *ut* and *vid* – and these eight appear to represent the total range of particles available to *tala*. The following paragraphs analyse these different particles one by one.

*Tala (e)mot*. This construct literally means ‘speak against’ and can be translated varyingly as ‘contradict’, ‘object’ or ‘oppose’. It is typically followed by a NP (human or non-human) or, less often, by a *that*-clause which may be regarded as a ARGUMENTATIVE.

Jag hörde till dem som talade emot ett omedelbart inträde  
‘I was one of those who opposed an immediate union’

*Tala för*. Translated as ‘speak for’ or ‘speak in favour of’, this is the opposite of *tala (e)mot*. Other suitable translations include ‘advocate’, ‘recommend’ and ‘suggest’. Like *tala (e)mot* it is usually complemented by a NP or a *that*-clause, and may be regarded as either BENEFACTIVE or ARGUMENTATIVE.

han har undvikit att tala för [...] självständighet  
‘he has avoided to advocate [...] independence’

As with their PP counterparts described above, both *tala (e)mot* and *tala för* often have a non-human subject which result in the more metaphorical interpretations ‘go/tell against’ and ‘point towards’ respectively.

*Tala igenom*. Literally ‘talk through’, this construct is always followed by a NP which may be described as a TOPIC (e.g. a problem or a question). Suitable translations include ‘thrash out’, ‘discuss’ and ‘ventilate’.

[Vi] skall träffas och tala igenom situationen.  
‘[We] will meet and thrash out the situation.’

*Tala in*. Literally ‘talk in’, *tala in* normally has the meaning of ‘record [speech on tape]’. In such cases it will be invariably followed by a CONTENT-

OBJECT NP in the form of a direct object like *meddelande* ‘message’ or something similar. Denoting the act of recording speech acoustically, *tala in* appears to represent a different and specialised dimension of *tala* usage. One instance was found in the corpora:

Peter Denver hade [...] talat in talet  
 ‘Peter Denver had [...] recorded the speech’

*Tala ner.* This construct, which is rare in the corpora studied (only one instance), has an exact equivalent in English ‘talk down [to]’, and is followed by an ADDRESSEE PP consisting of *till* ‘to’ and a human noun. It is equivalent to *tala* + PPs headed by *till* (and displays the same monological orientation), but the particle *ner* ‘down’ adds to this a notion of concrete or abstract verticality in the communicative situation. In some cases, ‘patronize’ might be a suitable translation.

Som om de på gudars vis talar ner till oss.  
 ‘As if they talk down to us like gods.’

*Tala om.* This is the most common construction involving a particle, comprising 80 percent of those instances. Although *om* means ‘about’, the most appropriate translation of *tala om* is undoubtedly ‘tell’. It is synonymous to and almost completely interchangeable with *berätta* (also ‘tell’. Sometimes ‘explain’, ‘say’ or ‘state’ are more suitable equivalents in English. It is usually followed by a *that*-clause or a *wh*-clause which carries the semantic component of MESSAGE. Commonly this MESSAGE is preceded by an ADDRESSEE in the form of a PP composed of the preposition *för* ‘for’ and a human noun.

han talade om att det fanns två kommunistiska program  
 ‘he said that there were two communist manifestos’

jag skall tala om för dig vad som är farligt  
 ‘I will tell you what is dangerous’

*Tala ut.* Literally ‘speak out’, *tala ut* is sometimes found without any complement. Usually, however, it is followed by a TOPIC PP headed by *om* ‘about’, and sometimes by an ADDRESSEE PP headed by *med* ‘with’. It may have an interpretation similar to that of *tala igenom* ‘thrash out’, ‘discuss’ or ‘ventilate’, but can also be translated as ‘avow’ or ‘confess’. Often it implies that the topic at issue has been hidden or suppressed but is now made public.

Det är bättre om vi talar ut om det här.  
 ‘It is better if we thrash this out.’

hon vill tala ut i TV  
 ‘she wants to speak out on TV’

*Tala vid.* Like *tala ner*, this particle construct is very rare in the corpora studied (one instance). It is also somewhat obsolete and it is more common to use the compound *vidtala*. *Vid* means ‘at’ or ‘by’, and *tala vid* can be translated as ‘inform’. It is followed by a human NP most appropriately described as an ADDRESSEE:

Då hade han talat vid alla de trogna vännerna  
 ‘Then he had informed all his loyal friends’

### *Subjects, SENDERS and human properties*

I shall conclude this section with a short excursus on that semantic role which performs the act of verbal communication, represented by the syntactic subject and labelled SENDER by Heid et al. 1996:53. The SENDER role, of course, is first and foremost associated with distinctly human properties. However, speech act verbs sometimes turn up with apparently non-human or part-of-a-whole subjects, and such instances are fairly common in the corpora studied here (almost 9 percent of the total number of instances).

*Human-related SENDERS.* Apart from straightforwardly human SENDERS, Heid et al. 1996:53 identify for Italian three types of human-related subjects which should be classified as human. These include metonymic sense extensions in the form of ‘part-of-a-whole’ standing for the ‘whole’, collective human entities and metonymic sense extensions in the sense of ‘objects’ or ‘places’ standing for ‘people’, all of which are represented in the Swedish corpora. Part-of-a-whole SENDERS are typically ‘parts’ which are related to the act of communication, e.g. *en röst* ‘a voice’. Collective human entities are often represented by institutions, organisations or committees, such as *regeringen* ‘the government’. Metonymic ‘objects’ or ‘places’ which stand for people include the following instance only:

I kväll talade New York till Vita huset  
 ‘Tonight New York spoke to the White House’

These human-related SENDERS behave exactly like human SENDERS in that they can appear as subjects of any construction involving *tala*.



*Artefacts connected to human communication.* SENDERS which do not have such human properties are referred to as ‘artefacts’ by Heid et al. 1996:54. It is pointed out that artefacts are commonly “connected with the human faculty of communication because they are the concrete product of such act and convey the human message”. This is undoubtedly true of many of the non-human SENDERS encountered in the corpora studied here, which comprise subjects denoting or conveying written texts like *tidningsartiklar* ‘newspaper articles’, *propositionen* ‘the government bill’, *rapporter* ‘reports’, *privatiseringslagen* ‘the privatisation law’ and *obduktionsprotokollet* ‘the autopsy report’, or those that denote or convey oral messages, e.g. *envisa rykten* ‘persistent rumours’ and *radion* ‘the radio’. Surely SENDERS like *datorn* ‘the computer’ and *siffrorna* ‘the figures’ can be assigned to this same group.

Heid et al. 1996:54 also suggest that SENDERS denoting scientific branches (‘science-field artefacts’) can be considered to be a product of human communication which can stand for the human entities that produce them. No clear cases have been found in this study, but possibly subjects like *DNA-analyser* ‘DNA analyses’, and *sysselsättningsutredningen* ‘the employment inquiry’ may have such an interpretation.

What these artefacts have in common is that they are usually found in combination with MESSAGE or TOPIC complements of *tala*, although there are occasional examples of LANGUAGE-OBJECT and null complements as well.

*Other non-human SENDERS.* However, the majority of non-human subjects found in the Swedish corpora do not seem to fit into any of those categories proposed for Italian by Heid et al. For example, several instances of *tala* display subjects which denote the abstract noun *skäl* ‘reason’ or *faktor* ‘factor’, like *rättsäkerhetsskäl* ‘reasons of rule of law’ and *samhällsekonomiska skäl* ‘national economic reasons’. Such SENDERS are followed by ARGUMENTATIVE PPs headed by *för* or *(e)mot* respectively, or by the particle constructs *tala för* and *tala (e)mot*.

Flera faktorer talar emot svenskarna.

‘Several factors go against [are unfavourable to] the Swedes.’

These ‘reason’ or ‘factor’ SENDERS are usually expressed in such general terms and not specified in detail, but sometimes a specific reason is made more explicit, either in the form of a NP or a *that*-clause, e.g. *det stora antalet*

*knivhugg* ‘the great number of stabs’ and *att loppet pågår ett dygn* ‘[the fact] that the race lasts a day’.

On the other hand, there are also several instances where this kind of non-human SENDERS are even more generalized and turn up as quantifier subjects or similar constructions like *mycket* ‘much’, ‘a great deal’, *det mesta* ‘most [things]’, *allting* ‘everything’ and *ingenting* ‘nothing’.

What all these decidedly non-human SENDERS have in common is that they are restricted to *tala* instances complemented by ARGUMENTATIVE constructions.

### The distribution of *tala* in the speech act domain

The first observation to be made from the data presented in the preceding section is that *tala* itself does not present a very high degree of polysemy. This is in concordance with speech act verbs in general, as recognised by Corazzari et al. 1996:75 for Italian, for instance. The main distinction to be noticed at this level is between the monological and the dialogical interpretation of *tala*. However, in combination with various complements and with constructs involving stressed verbal particles in particular, the meaning of *tala* diversifies and (with non-human subjects) extends ultimately outside the immediate domain of verbal communication.

#### *The monological/dialogical distinction*

It has been pointed out on several occasions that *tala* can have both a monological and a dialogical (or symmetrical) interpretation. Wierzbicka’s account of the difference between *speak* and *talk* in English (Wierzbicka 1987:381), is of great assistance in this respect. Whereas *speaking* is regarded here as an act which can consist in pure, formal monologising in which the speaker does not expect spontaneous verbal exchanges, *talking* requires informality, spontaneity and an expectation on the speaker’s part to receive verbal reactions. As noted, Swedish *tala* carries both these interpretations, and the distinction runs through much of the material reviewed here.

For example, in those instances in which *tala* does not have a complement, we have such disparate English translations as monological ‘make a speech’ and downright dialogical ‘chat’. In this case it is the number of the subject which determines the interpretation; a subject in the singular provides a monological interpretation, whereas a subject in the plural typically (but not always) renders a dialogical interpretation. Also, in instances where *tala* is followed by a NP we have both monologically and dialogically oriented uses,



notably in TOPIC NPs which may denote either the topic of a speech (monological) or the topic of a conversation (dialogical).

Perhaps the most apparent examples are those with complements involving ADDRESSEE PPs. If *tala* is followed by an ADDRESSEE PP headed by the preposition *med*, its meaning is invariably dialogical in Wierzbicka's terms. If the PP is headed by *till* (or perhaps *inför*), on the other hand, *tala* always gets a monological interpretation. BENEFACTIVE and ARGUMENTATIVE PPs always result in a monological interpretation, whereas TOPIC and LANGUAGE-OBJECT PPs can have either interpretation depending on the context.

Instances involving stressed verbal particles also display the same distinction. BENEFACTIVE and ARGUMENTATIVE *tala (e)mot* and *tala för* are normally monologically oriented (like their PP counterparts) as is *tala om*, while *tala igenom* is always dialogical. *Tala ut* can have either interpretation, which is reflected in the English translations 'discuss' or 'thrash out' (dialogical) vs. 'avow' or 'speak out' (monological). *Tala in*, *tala ner* and *tala vid* all have a monological orientation.

In summary, we find both monological and dialogical meanings of *tala* throughout the material studied. Commonly, this distinction is reflected in the English translations (*speak* vs. *talk*), and in some cases it even cuts straight across the same syntactic construction. In accordance with its basic nature, *tala* bridges over one of the most fundamental semantic distinctions present in the speech act domain, that between monologically and dialogically oriented verbal communication.

### *Particle-induced polysemy*

As already noted, stressed verbal particles provide the most effective means of altering and specifying the semantic content of *tala*. Eight different particles were identified in the corpora, each of which renders one or more separate and very specialised meanings, and assigns *tala* to well-defined categories or subgroups of the speech act domain. In the following, each particle construct is discussed in terms of such speech act subgroups. The classification of subgroups follows Wierzbicka 1987.

*Tala (e)mot.* The particle *(e)mot* carries a notion of opposition and conflict (recall the suggested translations 'contradict', 'object' and 'oppose') and may be appropriately assigned to the ARGUE group of speech act verbs.

*Tala för.* This is obviously the opposite of *tala (e)mot* and conveys a notion of enthusiasm and support (recall the suggested translations ‘advocate’, ‘recommend’ and ‘suggest’). It belongs to the ADVISE group.

*Tala igenom.* With its clear dialogical interpretation (recall the translations ‘thrash out’, ‘discuss’ and ‘ventilate’), *tala igenom* may be assigned to that category of speech act verbs which is labelled the DISCUSS group.

*Tala in.* This construct has a very isolated and specific meaning which does not fit into any of the speech act groups proposed by Wierzbicka (recall the translation ‘record [speech on tape]’).

*Tala ner.* For lack of a more appropriate option, the *tala ner* construct will here be assigned to the ARGUE group. Another possibility would be the REPRIMAND group. This includes verbs which carry the assumption that the addressee has done something bad (e.g. rebuke, reprove and admonish), and *tala ner* may in some cases at least be considered to be a very mild form of reprimand because it suggests that the speaker considers him/herself to know better than the addressee.

*Tala om.* This construct has several similar interpretations (recall the suggested translations ‘tell’, ‘inform’ and ‘say/state’) and is, therefore, assigned to both the TELL group and the INFORM group, as well as the ASSERT group of speech act verbs. All three groups contain verbs which denote the act of conveying a message, but with slightly different senses.

*Tala ut.* *Tala ut* has two different meanings. One is almost identical to *tala igenom* (discussed above) and should be assigned to the same DISCUSS group. The second was translated as ‘avow’ or ‘confess’ and rather belongs to the so-called ADMIT group.

*Tala vid.* Translated as ‘inform’, this construct can accordingly be assigned to the INFORM group of speech act verbs.

*Summary.* Stressed verbal particles specify the meaning of *tala* into the following speech act groups proposed by Wierzbicka 1987: ADMIT, ADVISE, ARGUE, ASSERT, DISCUSS, INFORM, TELL and possibly REPRIMAND. To these we may add a very specialised RECORD group for Swedish to account for the *tala in* construction.

*NP complements and lexicalised phrases*

Recall that some NP complements of *tala*, notably those that carried the semantic component of MESSAGE, are part of lexicalised VPs. Abstract nouns without articles were combined with *tala* to form constructions like *tala allvar* and *tala sanning*, and, like the particle constructs, these manifest a certain amount of polysemy. Thus, *tala allvar* and *tala förstånd* might be assigned to a BLAME group of speech act verbs, whereas *tala klarspråk* and perhaps *tala sanning* may belong to the ASSERT or STRESS groups. Again, the speech act subgroups suggested here belong to those proposed for English by Wierzbicka 1987.

The second form of MESSAGE NPs involved the noun *ord* ('word' or 'words') and an adjectival specifier. These may not form lexicalised phrases in the same way as the above NPs do but are still static and standardised constructions with very specific meanings and translations. Recall for instance the examples *tala bittra ord* 'lament' and *tala vackra ord* 'praise' which can be assigned to the COMPLAIN and PRAISE groups respectively.

Finally, the construction involving an ADDRESSEE NP and the PP *till rätta* 'to reason', as in *tala någon till rätta* 'bring somebody to reason' can be ascribed to either the ORDER group of speech act verbs, or perhaps the ASK group alongside English equivalents like *persuade* and *urge*.

#### *Extensions outside the speech act domain*

Thus far I have only discussed constructions which can be firmly ranged within the speech act domain. However, as we concluded in the discussion on properties of the SENDER role of *tala*, there are instances in which the subject of *tala* does not have human (or human-related) properties. Commonly, such non-human SENDERS are represented by 'artefacts' which denote objects containing written communication. As stated by Heid et al. 1996:54, they are concrete products of human communication and convey the human message. In such cases, the meaning of *tala* has clearly ventured from the semantic field of verbal communication and into that of written communication.

Perhaps more surprisingly, the majority of non-human SENDERS have no apparent relation to human communication at all. These invariably denote 'circumstances', and always turn up in combination with ARGUMENTATIVE constructions (PPs or particles). Clearly they should be regarded as metaphorical extensions of similar constructions involving human SENDERS. We should recall that *tala* in these cases is translated with terms like 'indicate' or 'point to(wards)'. Also, note that Swedish synonyms include *peka på* 'point

to' and *tyda på* (also 'point to' but *tyda* literally means 'make out', 'interpret' or similar), all of which undoubtedly do have a very clear connection to human communication.

## Conclusions

This article has been concerned with the polysemy of the basic Swedish speech act verb *tala*. Due to the fact that the corpus material from which data were drawn is fairly extensive, and that several tense forms of *tala* from various genres (including written and, to a limited extent, spoken language) were analysed, it is hoped that the instances studied form a representative albeit not complete slice of *tala* usage. A few conclusions can be drawn.

For one thing, we may conclude that *tala* is by and large confined to its own semantic field of verbal communication. The majority of instances denote spoken language. However, we should also note that the borders of this semantic field are not impenetrable as is evidenced in *tala* instances with various types of non-human subjects. Thus we have seen that *tala* can denote written communication if the SENDER is an artefact, and an abstract indicative argumentative form of communication if the SENDER is represented by 'circumstances'.

Second, it can be confirmed that *tala* exhibits a fair degree of polysemy within the field of verbal communication. The fundamental distinction between monological and dialogical (or symmetrical) communication is bridged by *tala*, which has both meanings. On a different level, stressed verbal particles and some NPs specialise and extend the use of *tala* to various subgroups of the speech act domain, and thereby generate meanings like ADMIT, ADVISE, ARGUE, ASSERT, COMPLAIN, DISCUSS, INFORM, REPRIMAND, TELL and others.

Last, we should note that the analysis and identification of semantic participant roles proposed for speech act verbs by Heid et al. 1996 has proved very useful in this attempt to chart the polysemy of *tala*.

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