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TALK IN ACADEMIC SPOKEN ENGLISH

The main goal of this article is to describe the occurrence of the verb *talk* in contemporary academic spoken English. The analysis proceeds along semantic, syntactic and pragmatic paths, with a focus on accounting for the functions performed by *talk* in academic spoken English. The occurrence of *talk* was investigated in small and large lectures in the MICASE corpus, with corpus linguistics constituting the major methodological tool. This article is addressed to linguists, students of linguistics and English philology, as well as to all scholars whose interests revolve around academic English.

1. Introduction

Although academic English has constituted the object of study for a number of years, the major thrust of the investigations has been couched in the quest for discovering the intricacies of academic written English (cf. e.g. Connor, 1996; Hyland, 2000). Of late, however, we have witnessed the swing of the pendulum towards a rising interest in academic spoken English, a trend which appears to have stemmed from a number of factors. Three of them seem to be of paramount importance: the growing importance of English as a *lingua franca* of communication and knowledge dissemination in the globalizing world (cf. e.g. Duszak, 2006), the availability of corpora of academic spoken English, with the MICASE corpus constituting a case in point (Simpson *et al.*, 2002), and the cognizance of the need to explore the unexplored, resulting in an increasing body of studies into academic spoken English (e.g. Mauranen, 2001; Swales, 2004).

Despite numerous contributions to the repertoire of knowledge concerning academic spoken English, the research into this genre is still believed to be in *statu nascendi*. Consequently, this article constitutes a modest contribution to the linguistic studies into academic spoken English. To be more precise, I shall strive to describe *talk*, one of the most frequent *verba dicendi*. The analysis will proceed along syntactic and semantic paths, which might provide evidence for a functional

interpretation of the actual usage of this verb. These linguistic findings, in turn, are believed to both equip the readers with a deeper understanding of the linguistic behavior of *talk*, and to validate, qualify or disconfirm the current (hypo)theses concerning the occurrence of this verb in contemporary academic spoken English. The study is based on actual language usage, with corpus linguistics constituting the major methodological tool, supplemented by introspective judgements in borderline cases. The investigation was conducted on academic lectures included in the *Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English* (MICASE), which is a collection of authentic texts recorded in the University of Michigan (Simpson *et al.*, 2002). The corpus consists of almost 200 hours (approximately 1.8 million words) of contemporary academic speech, which was recorded and transcribed from 1997 until 2002. The entire corpus is available on the internet website.¹ This article, written by a linguist and a teacher of English, is addressed to linguists and final-year students of linguistics or English philology. Since academic spoken English is still relatively unexplored, this article will be deemed a success should it constitute an incentive for its readers to explore academic spoken English, with a view to contributing to the linguistic repertoire of knowledge, thus occupying the niche, to use Swales's (1990) term.

2. *Talk* in academic spoken English

Since the occurrence of *talk* is extremely high in the whole corpus, as it is the second most frequent *verbum dicendi* in the MICASE corpus (cf. Gawlik, 2010), it was deemed essential to limit the scope of the investigation to selected speech events, thus confining the analysis to small and large lectures. The choice of lectures was intentional, as the lecture talk constitutes academic spoken genre *par excellence*, thus reflecting the prototypical features of academic spoken English. The occurrence of *talk* amounted to 1103 hits of all lemmas of *talk* (after eliminating wrong counts) in a corpus of small and large lectures consisting of 578,204 words.

2.1. Syntactic patterns of talk

Valency patterns of verbs may provide a number of clues, one of which is the information concerning the (in)transitivity of verbs (Crystal, 2003). Moreover, the arguments of verbs may constitute a source of information concerning the typical syntax of a given verb, thus providing grounds for a functional interpretation of the linguistic behavior of a given verb. Consequently, to gain this information, it was essential to investigate the syntactic patterns of *talk*, and the results of the analysis are included in Table 1.

¹ <http://micase.umdl.umich.edu>

TABLE 1. Syntactic patterns of *talk* in MICASE lectures

Syntactic patterns of <i>talk</i>	The number of occurrences	Comparative percentage of occurrence
<i>Talk + about</i>	893	80.96%
<i>Talk + quantifier/adverb of place or time + about</i>	62	5.62%
<i>Talk + to</i>	49	4.44%
<i>Talk + no object/zero context</i>	35	3.17%
<i>Talk + to somebody about</i>	17	1.54%
<i>Talk + something</i>	11	1.00%
<i>Talk + adverb</i>	11	1.00%
<i>Talk + of</i>	6	0.54%
<i>Talk + with</i>	5	0.45%
<i>Talk + like</i>	4	0.36%
<i>Talk + back</i>	3	0.27%
<i>Talk + other prepositions (whether, for, at)</i>	3	0.27%
<i>Talk + on</i>	1	0.09%
<i>Talk + so</i>	1	0.09%
<i>Talk + through</i>	1	0.09%
<i>Talk + somebody out of</i>	1	0.09%
TOTALS	1103	100%

As the above findings demonstrate, in an overwhelming majority of cases, *talk* is followed by the preposition *about*: 893 occurrences, constituting 80.96 % of all the occurrences of *talk* in the corpus analysed, as exemplified below:

(1) [...] i'll do that next time, using this aggregate production function. uh, and **i'll also talk about** the Lucas Model there's the Lucas paper is in your, xerox course-packet there's a little bit of reading on it, in the textbook also. (LEL280JG051)

(2) [...] i don't expect you to, know all of these various, types, but **we will be talking about** specific serotonin subtypes. the main thing to keep in mind is that there's a lot of them. (LEL500SU088)

(3) [...] so this is what i wanna **talk about** today. loops. **we talked about** loops a little bit when **we talked about** just algorithms in general without looking at com-

puter code, **we talked about** algorithms **we talked about**, ways of_ **we talked about** the idea of writing down steps of instructions which will then be executed by a machine. (LEL295JU035)

This high frequency of *talk about* is attributable to a number of factors: firstly, the employment of the preposition *about* in approximately 80% of all the occurrences of *talk* indicates that the primary function of *talk* is to introduce the general topic of the lecture, as exemplified in (1)–(3). This observation, in turn, translates into the fact that *talk about* performs a metadiscoursal function by perspectivizing the topic of the lecture for the listeners. The notion of metadiscourse, so prevalent in academic communication, appears to be a *sine qua non* condition of a successful conveyance of ideas. This is especially justified by the fact that listeners are not normally experts in a given field of knowledge, and thanks to oral advance organizers, they may find it easier to assimilate and process new information, a claim which seems to be corroborated by Hyland, who claims that metadiscourse may “help to organise prose as a coherent text and convey a writer’s personality, credibility, reader sensitivity and relationship to the message” (2000: 109). This may be regarded as a listener-friendly strategy, manifesting the presence of the speakers in the discourse produced.

A more detailed corpus analysis of *talk about* reveals some interesting features concerning this *verbum dicendi*. Firstly, *talk* performs the function of denoting discourse topic, rather than introducing an individual message conveyed by the speaker, the latter function being typically performed by *say* (cf. e.g. Gawlik, 2010), which means that, in its prototypical nature, *talk* is intransitive, a notion corroborated by Dirven (1982: 39), who claims that “[i]t is the transitive nature of a verb that is a precondition for a linguistic perspectivization of the message to take place.” Consequently, the focus of *talk about* on the discourse topic as a whole, rather than on the conveyance of individual speech acts, renders *talk* a verb whose primary function is to provide information on the topic of discourse. For this reason, *talk* may be called a topic-denoting verb.

The heavy reliance on the preposition *about*, following *talk*, in academic spoken discourse (amounting to 80.96% in MICASE lectures) appears to be confirmed by Dirven’s (1982) findings, whose analysis revealed that *talk* typically prefers a topic with *about*. My investigation of *talk* followed by *about* may even amount to 85% of the overall occurrence of *talk* should two other categories distinguished in Table 1 be subsumed under the first category. The second category, distinguished for the purposes of this linguistic investigation, i.e. *talk* + quantifier/adverb (of place or time) + *about*, consists of 62 occurrences, constituting 5.62% of all the occurrences of *talk* in MICASE small and large lectures. This category does not seem to depart pragmatically from the first category, i.e. *talk* + *about*, due to the fact that the intervening words or phrases do not appear to change the basic function of *talk about*, i.e. the function of providing information on the topic of the discourse, as exemplified below:

(4) [...] it may be negligible in comparison to the dispersion effect and i can estimate the order of magnitude by knowing the order of magnitude of the diffusion coefficient. so indeed i can separate. and **we'll talk more about** that next time because, as usual we're kinda jumping ahead. (LES205JG124)

(5) [...] so these simple environments seem to, somehow foster, the, cycle, cycles... so first **i'm gonna talk, a little bit about** what are called microtine cycles, and microtine is uh, uh these are microtine rodents, [...] (LEL175JU112)

(6) [...] and alleles are alternative forms of a gene and for example **we were talking yesterday about** Huntington's Disease and one allele is big-H which is dominant, which confers the disease on anybody who has it [...] (LEL175JU154)

(7) [...] (xx) okay <LAUGH> <PAUSE :09> so um, i w- i wanted to uh, to t- to, start **talking today and Thursday about** the, uh, the nineteenth century. you okay about moving ahead? (LES315SU129)

(8) [...] also i gathered from it that they um, **they were talking here about** that like just like women's reactions, that they also feel guilt about secon- sex and they blame women for like, their source of their fantasies, okay whe- where are you? (LES565SU137)

As already mentioned, in 62 occurrences (5.62% of the total), *talk about* was separated by one of the following grammatical categories: a quantifier, as exemplified in (4) and (5), an adverb of time, as in (6) and (7), or an adverb of place, as illustrated in (8). However, these examples, and the remaining such occurrences in the corpus, appear to demonstrate that neither the intervening quantifiers nor adverbs seem to stripe *talk about* of its basic function of denoting discourse topic due to the fact that the listeners are equipped with information concerning the macrostructure of the lecture.

As the examples further demonstrate, the topic may be introduced in a variety of ways: by means of the pronoun *that*, referring anaphorically to the preceding stretch of discourse, as in (4) and (8). The topic can be also introduced by a clause, as in (5) or by a noun phrase, as in (6) and (7). However, irrespective of the syntactic means of introducing the topic, the inclusion of quantifiers or adverbs does not appear to obscure the intended topic of the lecture. On the contrary, I would even go as far as assuming tacitly that the inclusion of these words performs the function of facilitating the intake of the message conveyed. This is particularly applicable to adverbs of place and time. Their inclusion in (6) and (8) seems to facilitate the retrieval of appropriate information which the lecturer has already attempted to impart. The reference to the time or place of the message conveyed, as in (6) and (8) respectively, is supposed to refer anaphorically to the lectures already delivered, thus reminding the listeners of what has already been said. The employment of quantifiers, by comparison, may also provide information on the amount of the message conveyed.

2.2. Syntactic patterns of discourse topic conveyed by means of talk about

Since *talk about* performs a topic denoting function, it seemed interesting to investigate which syntactic patterns are preferred and which ones are dispreferred to denote discourse topic. The results of the analysis are included in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Syntactic patterns of discourse topic conveyed by means of *talk about* in MICASE small and large lectures

Syntactic patterns of discourse topic conveyed by <i>talk about</i>	Number of occurrences	Percentage of occurrence
Noun phrase	694	71.4%
Pronoun	148	15.23%
Clause	74	7.61%
What	32	3.29%
Gerund	21	2.16%
Other	3	0.31%
TOTALS	972	100%

2.2.1. Noun phrases denoting discourse topic

As illustrated in Table 2, *talk about* is most frequently followed by noun phrases: 694 occurrences, constituting 71.4% of all the occurrences of *talk about* in the corpus, as exemplified below:

(9) [...] uh the whole notion of childhood expands in this period and **i will talk about the emergence of childhood as a life stage**, along with this family this new st- family structure. (LEL105SU113)

(10) [...] sit quietly and digest what i am saying, i'll talk about transcription one hour, it's translation the next hour, and twenty-two hours later **we're talking about mutation and regulation of genes**. that would take a week and a half in the regular term [...] (LEL175MU014)

(11) [...] tiny incremental and easily understood changes over short periods of time, can over long periods of time geological time all add up, to the incredible diversity of life. um **we're gonna talk about five agents of micro-evolution**. we're gonna talk about mutation, gene flow, genetic drift, non-random mating and natural selection. (LEL175JU154)

(12) [...] but let's break this down a little bit. so let's **talk about *the women in pornography themselves*** for example those who pose, for Playboy or whatever. (LES565SU137)

(13) [...] so that's basically the terminology. we don't have to, i, i don't expect you to, know all of these various, types, but **we will be talking about *specific serotonin subtypes***. the main thing to keep in mind is that there's a lot of them. (LEL500SU088)

(14) [...] finally what about lung cancer? in ways lung cancer's the worse scenario of all, **we've talked about *the terrible prognosis for lung cancer***, and here's one of the reasons that lung cancer has such a terrible prognosis. (LEL175SU106)

(15) [...] **we talked about *the ability of cancer cells to invade through surrounding tissues in terms of penetrating the vessels***, and now **we just talked about *the transport of cancer cells via the bloodstream***, uh to distant sites of the body, and we've seen that most of the cancer cells die along the way most of them don't make it [...] (LEL175SU106)

As the examples demonstrate, noun phrases, typically used as the object of *talk about*, exhibit at least two characteristics: firstly, in a vast majority of occurrences, the employment of noun phrases, in preference to clauses, might be attributable to the principle of the economy of language, whereby there exists a preference for shorter and more condensed options. In a number of cases, conveying discourse topic by means of noun phrases may be attributable to the employment of grammatical metaphor, because “[i]n grammatical metaphor, where the shift is not from one lexical item but from one grammatical category to another [...]” (Halliday, 2004: 79). This appears to be the case of (9) and (10). For the sake of explication, it needs to be pointed out that in (9) the congruent verb *emerge* has been transformed into its nominal equivalent *emergence*, thus grammaticizing activity into thinginess. This, in turn, constitutes a more compact way of packing and conveying information. The second interesting observation concerning the employment of *talk about* followed by a noun phrase is its metatextual function, because, as has already been mentioned, it has a topic denoting function, thanks to which the listener is equipped with information concerning the oncoming, present or past discourse topics. This organizational function is supposed to facilitate the processing of information input by foretelling what types of information are to be imparted, as illustrated in (9) – (13). Additionally, *talk about* may also be used to inform or remind the listeners of the topics which have already been mentioned, as in (14) and (15). Consequently, this may constitute a bridge between what has already been said and what may be conveyed next. Alternatively, another function of *talk about* in the past tense, followed by a noun phrase, may also be the function of condensing long clauses included in the preceding part of discourse, simultaneously clarifying the illocutionary force of the preceding discourse should it prove to be unclear to the listeners.

3. Discussion of other significant findings

As illustrated in Table 2, the remaining syntactic patterns employed to denote discourse topic comprise pronouns (15.23%), clauses (7.61%), *what* (3.29%), gerund (2.16%), and others (0.31%). The undisputed popularity of noun phrases may be attributable to the fact that they can convey a large amount of information in a relatively concise way, particularly if they evince a significant degree of pre-modification and postmodification. The greater popularity of noun phrases rather than pronouns is understandable on the grounds that the former are more explicit, while the latter only tend to refer to the preceding chunk of discourse. The remaining syntactic patterns, i.e. clauses, *what* and gerund forms may not be regarded as particularly popular as denoting discourse topic.

Semantically-wise, the employment of *talk*, particularly in absolute uses, revealed that this basic *verbum dicendi* may convey other meanings in addition to the meaning of expressing something in speech or discussing something, the latter being the case of *talk about*. The additional meanings attested in the MICASE corpus of lectures comprise extensive linguistic action, physical aspects of the linguistic action, and the cognitive process and capacity for linguistic action. Still, extensive linguistic action was by far the most popular meaning conveyed by *talk* used in zero context.

Pragmatically-wise, *talk* followed by direct object, with the preposition *about* omitted, implied discussing something at a very serious and professional level. Moreover, the employment of the preposition *of*, instead of the preposition *about*, indicated reference to some selected aspect of the discourse topic, rather than discussing it holistically, as was the case of employing the preposition *about*. The usage of the preposition *on*, by comparison, indicated emphatic dwelling on a given topic, with only one occurrence in the MICASE lectures. The corpus findings also revealed that *talk* may be used with a relatively wide repertoire of prepositions. Still, their occurrence was extremely low. This, in turn, implies that they are either not very popular in the lecture talk or they constituted idiosyncratic uses of academic lecturers.

Finally, pronoun correlations revealed that *we* is the most frequent pronoun in conjunction with *talk*: 508 occurrences, 46.06% of all the pronouns. A more detailed investigation demonstrated that in a majority of cases the pronoun *we* was used inclusively. This means that the listeners were perspectivized and drawn into the discourse produced, or even invited to participate in the lecture.

In view of all these findings, it needs to be reiterated that *talk* is typically used with the pronoun *we* denoting inclusive reference (i.e. the addressor and the audience). *Talk* is typically followed by *about* and a noun phrase to denote discourse topic, as in *Today we'll talk about + noun phrase*. Consequently, *talk* typically perspectivizes discourse topic, thus performing a metadiscursive function in MICASE lectures.

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