Reported Speech: A Central Skill of Conversation

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Reported speech is a prominent and recurrent feature of conversational language, but its importance is often sidelined in many ESL materials, with most ESL textbooks treating reporting as a grammar point similar to canonical grammar targets such as passive or causative constructions. The semantics of the reporting verbs and the interactional uses of reported speech are usually given little attention in coursebooks. In this paper I explain the importance of reported speech, particularly in the English language. I refer to corpus studies to challenge some of the widely accepted assumptions about the grammar of reported speech. I also investigate the semantics of the reporting verbs, (including *be like*) and discuss some of the interactional uses of reported speech in such genres as spoken narrative and topic proffering.

間接話法は会話の中で何度も使用される重要な物であるが、多くの英語教材ではそれほど重要視されていなく、殆どの教材では受け身や使役の様に一般的な文法として扱われている。教材では間接話法の意味論と会話中の間接話法は控えめに取り上げられている。この論文は特に英語会話での間接話法を重要視しており、コーパスによる間接話法の研究結果との違いを参照する。その上、間接話法の動詞（be likeを含む）と会話中の話術と話題提供による間接話法の使用の仕方を説明する。

THERE IS widespread agreement (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981; McCarthy, 1998) that everyday conversation is suffused with references to the speech of others or the self. This is canonically done by use of a reporting verb (e.g., *say*) with a mention of the speaker and possibly listener and a reference to what was said such as, "She said, 'I just wanted to see how the costume turned out'" (Eggins & Slade, 1997, p. 306). Reporting what the self and others have said is a key skill if one is to engage in naturalistic interaction. However, in ESL instruction the topic has a tendency to be undertaught, with textbooks often treating reported speech in a minimalistic way. Focus is primarily given to the backshifting of tenses (e.g., *I want to go* is transformed in indirect reported speech to "She said that she wanted to go"), even though corpus data suggests this is an overly reductive view and that reports in natural conversation are often not backshifted (McCarthy, 1998). Furthermore, in most textbooks, little if any attention is paid to the semantics of the main reporting verbs *say*, *speak*, *talk* and *tell*, although the differences between these verbs must be understood to avoid common errors such as **She say me her holiday* or **She talk that she go home* (example sentences I have collected from classroom exercises). Similarly, the interactional settings of reported speech are generally not mentioned in textbooks, with no focus placed on the role of reported speech in such areas as narratives or topic proffering. In this paper I will suggest that in addition to the grammar of

reported speech, teachers should have a thorough knowledge of the semantics of the main reporting verbs and an awareness of other reporting structures such as *be like* and *go*. Also, teachers should understand the interactional goals that speakers seek to achieve by reporting speech.

The Centrality of Speaking About Speaking

Humans are loquacious beings who devote quite a lot of their talk to quoting, mimicking, paraphrasing, and generally referring to the talk of themselves and others. In reporting what has been said, they can position themselves along a gradient that runs, in the words of Brown and Levinson (1987), from "quoty" to "gisty" (p. 206). People (claim to) report the exact words that were uttered, or some simulacrum thereof. They report their thoughts as if they were utterances and they report stretches of language without making it clear whether it was a thought or actually uttered.

This ongoing concern with speech as a central human activity is carried over into writing formats. Novels invariably include long stretches of talk between characters, and a stream of consciousness novel represents the workings of the mind, inasmuch as it is open to introspection, as basically verbal in nature. Similarly, academic writing, such as this paper, is full of references to the words of others.

According to Bakhtin (1981), "The transmission and assessment of the speech of others, the discourse of another, is one of the most widespread and fundamental topics of human speech" (p. 337). Bakhtin was referring to the philosophical dimensions of reported speech in society and literature. With reference to language teaching, this view of the speech of others and of the self as a prime locus of social action was taken up by McCarthy (1998), who stated,

> It is hard to imagine a day of our lives when we do not at some point support our discourse with direct or indirect reference to someone else's words. It is equally hard to imagine, therefore, any second language pedagogy claiming real adequacy that did not take the matter of speech reporting very seriously and give it a place in the syllabus. (p. 150)

If this view of the importance of reported speech in everyday language use is accepted, it will probably be taken for granted that learners of an L2 should receive thorough instruction on how to *do reporting* in the target language. Not only should reported speech be given a prominent place in the syllabus, the variety of possibilities available to reporters of speech should also be made available to students. But the inclusion of reported speech in a course of study faces a challenge in the way it is conceptualized as a target for study, learning, and use.

Reported Speech: Grammar, Semantics, and Interaction

Grammar

Reported speech often features in the table of contents of language coursebooks for EFL and ESL students under the heading of *Grammar*. For example, in *Top Notch: English for Today's World 3,* (Saslow & Ascher, 2011), the list of contents represents the learning objectives in table format, including such categories as Reading and Vocabulary. Unit 5 deals with reporting from the perspective of direct speech and indirect speech, listing these under the Grammar heading. Similarly, *Lifestyle: English for Work, Socializing & Travel* (Dubicka & O'Keefe, 2010) also presents the contents page in table format and also includes reported speech under the Grammar heading. This categorization of reported speech as a grammatical target, similar in nature to tenses and passive constructions, is found repeatedly in EFL and ESL coursebooks.

When the contents of units about reported speech in these textbooks are examined, the predominant concern is with backshifting tenses. Typically there is an example pair of sentences with the first sentence showing the words spoken by a person and the second

sentence reporting this utterance with a reporting verb, usually *say,* in the simple past tense and the verb of the original utterance backshifted. The exercise then provides a series of sentences that students have to transform into reported speech by adding a reference to the speaker plus a reporting verb, usually the simple past of the verb *say*, and then backshift the verb of the original utterance (see example exercise in Appendix). By these means, the teacher can provide students with a learning point that clearly frames the students' answers as right or wrong.

This conceptualization of reported speech as a grammatical transformation based on backshifting may meet institutional needs, but is challenged by McCarthy (1998) who stated that corpus analysis reveals that backshifting tenses is not as canonical as many ESL coursebooks would seem to suggest. Corpus studies show that reports often retain the tense of the original, a point that is often referred to only tangentially in student texts. McCarthy also found that the reporting verb is often in the past continuous tense. This aspect of reporting is usually not referred to in coursebooks, which perhaps creates the unintended impression that all reporting must be done with a simple past tense verb.

Semantics

Such is the dominance of the grammatical view of reported speech that the semantics of the reporting verbs are also often overlooked in textbooks. As Barbieri and Eckhardt (2007) reported, corpus analysis shows that "not surprisingly, *say* and *tell* were by far the most frequent reporting verbs in both the registers analyzed, newspaper writing and conversation" (p. 326). The frequencies for both words in conversation were 1011 times per million words and 317 times per million words, respectively.

However, these common reporting verbs are often presented as if they are synonyms differing only in sentence construction (see example in Appendix). This overlooking of the semantics of the reporting verbs is problematic for several reasons. First, there is the special status of reporting verbs in English compared with other languages. According to Goddard (2011), "One of the most noticeable things about speech-act verbs in English is that there are so many of them—hundreds rather than the dozens (or even fewer) found in many other languages" (p. 150). This proliferation of reporting verbs (see Wierzbicka, 1987, for an exhaustive list of speech act verbs such as *admit*, *agree*, *declare*, *announce*, etc.) is evidence of the centrality of reported speech in English language discourse.

The fecundity of reporting verbs in English, in comparison to other languages, also indicates that attempting translation of the verbs for students may not be an adequate way to help students differentiate between reporting verbs. Fluent speakers of a language are often at a loss to adequately account for the differences between near synonyms. High frequency reporting verbs such as *say*, *speak*, *talk,* and *tell* do not cause any usage problems for proficient speakers of English. However, a learner asking a teacher to explain the differences may cause a real headache. Defining *saying* as *telling* or *speaking* as *talking* is perhaps a natural tendency for teachers faced with the task of explaining the meanings of these words to learners. The verbs are not synonymous, but the differences between them are often not readily accessible to casual introspection. For example, Dirven, Goossens, Putseys, and Vorlat (1982) in their book *The Scene of Linguistic Action and its Perspectivization by Speak, Talk, Say and Tell* devote all 148 pages of their book to a dense analysis of these four reporting verbs. Clearly, this level of explication is unsuitable for most classroom settings. Even without reference to the literature, casual examination will reveal that these verbs are polysemous and have complex variations in their meanings.

The underlying mental and semantic architecture of reporting verbs may be one cause for some of the difficulty surrounding definitions. Wierzbicka (1996) places the verb *say* on the list of semantic primitives; that is, they are words that represent concepts that exist in all languages as part of the intellectual endowment of humans. Primitives are held to be semantically irreducible and they cannot

be defined without recourse to circularity or obscurity. For the word *say* Wierzbicka explained,

> The primitive SAY occupies, one might say, an intermediate place between mental predicates and the action predicate 'DO.' In a sense, "saying something" can be seen as a form of "doing something," and so the "subject" of SAYING can be seen as an agent. Since, however, SAYING can also be done in one's head, the "subject" of SAYING can also be seen as a "psychological subject," analogous to the "subject" of THINK and WANT. (p. 120)

If the word for the production of oral language is represented as a semantic primitive, which is to say, universal, atomistic, and essentially indefinable in nature, then it seems reasonable to assume that a teacher may be able to invoke the base concept in the learner's understanding. But it is also reasonable to assume that a teacher may then have difficulty in differentiating various near synonyms for the concepts that exist in English and may fall into either circularity (using the words to define each other) or obscurity (using more complex vocabulary than the original word) in the explanation.

When explaining, it is necessary for the teacher to make it clear that the verbs have multiple meanings and that any explication that is made in the classroom makes no claim to being comprehensive. Other senses and usages do exist, but some basic meanings can be given in order for learners to start to tease apart the verbs into something more comprehensible.

A further point that learners must be made aware of is that the choice of reporting verb is up to the speaker, and that when choosing to report a speech event, there are a number of possibilities available to the reporter, all of them correct in some way. The reporter has the right to perspectivize the scene of linguistic action (Dirven et al., 1982) in a way that best fits the purpose at hand.

The following will help to understand what is meant by this perspectivization. The speech event can be divided into its separate parts, which are (a) the sender of the message, (b) the message, and (c) the receiver of the message. The message is also conceivable in various ways along a gradient, from the most fine-grained, direct reporting representation, to something a bit more coarse-grained and gisty, mentioning only the topic, but not the contents of the utterance, to, finally, a mere reporting of the act of speech production, devoid of content. An instance of this content-free reporting is found in such utterances as *They were talking all night* or *She said something but I couldn't understand a word.*

To give a concrete example of perspectivization, take the situation where a speaker (A) produces the sentence *I'm going to go to Hawaii this summer*, directed towards a listener (B). This can then be reported in a variety of ways:

1. *A was saying to B that he was going to go to Hawaii this summer.*

This reports the perceived informational content of A's utterance. The inclusion of B is optional in this report.

2. *A was talking to B about his vacation plans.*

This reports the topic of A's utterance (as understood by the reporter). Again the inclusion of a listener is nonobligatory.

3. *A was speaking to/with B about his vacation plans.*

This is similar to example 2, with perhaps the suggestion that A and B were involved in an interactional exchange as indicated by the alternative preposition *with*. The inclusion of a listener is also not obligatory in reports using *speak*.

4 a). *A told B that he was going to go to Hawaii this summer.*

4 b). *A was telling B about his vacation plans.*

The sentences 4 a) and 4 b) both report the content and topic of A's utterance, but in this case the inclusion of B, the receiver of the message, is obligatory.

From this simple case we can see some of the possibilities open to a reporter of a speech event. The choice of which verb to use is, in the final analysis, up to the reporter.

Clearly the level of the students is an important factor to consider when teaching the semantics of reported speech verbs, but setting these few cases alongside one another will hopefully help learners perceive some of the underlying meanings of the reporting verbs and understand that the differences are not simply ones of sentence-level grammar.

In addition to the four verbs listed above, there is another reporting expression that features prominently in the discourse of native and proficient speakers of English but is almost entirely absent from ESL and EFL teaching materials. This is a form of the *be* verb plus *like* used in a quotative function closely resembling the verb *say*. *Touchstone 4* (McCarthy, McCarten, & Sandiford, 2006) includes *be like* in its quotative function, but this is an exception. The acceptability of *be like* as a quotative expression may be questioned in some quarters as it represents a case of an emerging language form, as described by Romaine and Lange (1991), who commented that it was spreading from its supposed origins primarily in the speech of teenage females and went on to state that "We believe the use of quotative *like* is spreading. We have observed it in the colloquial speech of educated people in their 30s, and even occasionally in print" (p. 269). In the years since this was written, quotative *be like* has spread widely and is now in common use among a wide variety of English speakers as in the following quote from a serious online news and current affairs discussion show: "She just doesn't like gay people, she's like 'In Massachusetts they've been legally gay for 10 whole years'" (Uygur & Kasparian, 2015). Despite its widespread use, the form may still have some residual association with the slangy speech of young people.

One objection that may be raised to the inclusion of *be like* as a quotative, in addition to the charge of it being a slang term, is that it merely replaces the verb *say* and thus represents no gain for the students. However the two words are not exactly the same, as noted by Romaine and Lange (1991) who gave two examples of quotative like that could be rendered with *say*:

1. She said, "What are you doing here?"

   And I'm LIKE, "Nothing much," y'know. I explained the whole…weird story

   And she's LIKE, "Um…Well, that's cool."

2. A man came up to me and said, "You really look like Princess Di." And he looked at me and he's LIKE, "Are you?" (p. 227)

Romaine and Lange (1991) then went on to describe how *be like* differs from *say*:

> It can be seen here that *like* functions much in the same way as the verb *say* does in introducing reported speech. In both these examples a form of the verb *be* followed by *like* alternates with *say*, and where *be* + *like* occurs, it appears paraphrasable by *say* with no apparent change in referential meaning. However, we will qualify this considerably in the course of our analysis, because in many, if not most cases, discourses introduced by *be* + *like* can also represent internal thought, as Butters (1982) noted. In [a third example below], for example, it is not certain that the speaker actually SAID "no." Rather, the hearer is invited to infer that this is what the speaker was thinking or saying to himself as the girl approached:

3. And I saw her coming, and I'm LIKE, "Noooooooooo." (p. 227)

The ambiguity as to whether reported language was said or thought is a key interactional strategy, and this aspect of quotative *like* is not available to reports using *say*. In addition to this, a further se-

mantic aspect of *be like* as a quotative is connected to one of the other senses of the word, namely *similar to*. If we accept that any given utterance realizes aspects of its meaning in ways beyond lexical-grammatical structure (by pitch, speed, accent, paused onset, gaze, gesture and so on), then we tacitly accept that the report of that utterance will probably not capture all of these dimensions. Every report must make some compromises once the original utterance is decontextualized and de-authored. In a sense, a report can only make the claim to be *similar* to the original utterance, and by using the structure *be like* to report an utterance the reporter is actually being more accurate in his or her report, claiming similitude rather than faithfulness in all points of the original utterance. In example 3 quoted above, it would be difficult to claim that the reported "no" captured the exact length, intonation and pitch of the original "no."

Interaction

If the semantic aspects of reported speech play a marginal role in many ESL materials, the interactional aspects of reported speech are often completely absent from those materials. In addition to knowledge of the grammar of reported speech and the semantics of the reporting verbs, students should be made aware of some of the interactional purposes that reported speech serves to accomplish. They will then be able to use reported speech in common classroom situations.

Reported Speech in the Classroom

In a language classroom, there are various ways that reported speech can be used by students to achieve broader interactional goals. Many speaking activities are based upon a topic that has been externally imposed by either the teacher or a textbook. Consequently, when left to initiate conversations by themselves, many students struggle to proffer topics and rely on a restricted number of strategies. Default questions such as *How was your weekend?* tend to be recycled with monotonous regularity. An alternative strategy is to proffer topics through the use of reported speech. Sequences such as *I was talking to my friend about the school festival and he was saying that he's not going this year* can be used to suggest a topic for possible uptake by the interlocutor and provide a diversity of language practice, rather than the usual direct question style that many learners engage in when trying to kickstart a conversation.

Another venue for the use of reported speech is in the protection of face involved in welcoming a new participant into a conversation. On a social level, a sudden discontinuance of talk or a clear switch to a new topic upon the entrance of a newcomer could be perceived of as a face-threatening act, as could the unmarked continuance of discourse without any attempt to include a new participant. Instead, rather than leaving the newcomer to work out what is going on, the participants can offer a brief greeting and orientation that will include the newcomer in the interaction by relating the nature of the interrupted talk. Consider the following stretch of discourse:

> Hi Jun, how's it going? I was just talking to Yuki and she was saying that she has to work both days this weekend.

The use of reporting in this example shows that referring to ongoing talk serves the dual functions of continuing the unfolding interaction whilst simultaneously orienting all participants to the changed circumstances of that interaction, that is, the entry of a new participant who has equal rights to participate. The use of reporting here is primarily for interactional purposes.

A further use of reported speech in classroom activities is in storytelling episodes. The centrality of spoken narrative in daily conversation is hard to overstate. Burns (2001) reported, "In Slade's research 'story telling genres' accounted for 43.4 percent of casual conversation that occurred in workplace coffee breaks, a figure that reflects the importance placed on sharing personal experiences in everyday social life" (p. 126). Romaine and Lange (1991) suggested that the use of reported speech during narratives may be doing

important interactional work whereby "presenting a narrative by reenacting it as a series of speech exchanges also simulates the normal exchange pattern of conversation and may therefore be perceived as less of an interruption than a narrative presented entirely from one's own perspective" (p. 269). Therefore, students should be encouraged to use reported speech in narrative episodes, especially at the climax stage of the narrative, in order to develop their stories beyond the simple sequential recounting of events linked by adverbs such as *next*, *and then*, and so on.

In an attempt to develop reporting skills, I instituted a period of free conversation at the beginning of each of my conversation classes. After the period of talk was finished, all students had to stand up and report their conversation to the class using one of the reporting verbs. The only condition was that they were not to repeat the form used by the previous speaker. For example, if a student reported a conversation as "Yuki said that she worked late last weekend," the next reporter could use any reporting verb except the *say that* pattern. Once the report was made correctly, the student could sit down. This activity served to develop a variety of reporting strategies and also ensured that the conversations were attended to carefully by the participants, because they knew that they would have to report the contents of their talk later. After weekly repetition of this activity, students were able to make varied and subtle reports of foregoing talk such as in the following recorded data: "We are talking about favorite curtain. Minami said she want to buy her favorite curtain but she don't have space to put on it, something like that." This report illustrates the way in which the learner could manipulate the forms to report topic, speaker, and content in a comprehensible way that goes beyond the simple *she said* style reports that mention the speaker and content of the utterance only.

Conclusion

In this paper I have suggested that reporting the speech of the self or others is a very important ability for students to possess, but that the topic has the tendency to be undertaught. Teaching materials generally do not place any special emphasis on reporting speech, granting it the same weight as other grammatical functions. In addition to this, the topic is usually treated as a simple grammatical function, namely backshifting of tenses, which does not accord fully with the findings of corpus studies. In addition, the semantics of the reporting verbs is generally not attended to, or attended to only superficially, even though clear differentiation of common reporting words is vital for understanding the various ways in which a speech event can be perspectivized by the person doing the reporting. Finally, the interactional uses of reported speech are generally not attended to in the teaching of reporting, perhaps with the assumption that lexis and grammar are the main business of the language classroom. It is hoped that the points outlined in this paper can contribute to a better understanding of the nature and centrality of talk about talk in human social interaction and encourage teachers to teach and practice reporting intensively in all of its dimensions.

Bio Data

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Appendix

Sample Reported Speech Exercise From Coursebooks

1. *Top Notch* (Saslow & Archer, 2011): Exercise B, p. 55

Grammar Practice. Change each statement from direct speech to indirect speech, changing the verb tense in the indirect speech statement.

1) The TV reporter said, "The landslide is one of the worst in history."
2) He also said, "It caused the destruction of half the town."
3) My sister called and said, "There is no electricity because if the hurricane."
4) The newspaper said, "There was a tornado in the central part of the country."
5) The paper said, "The drought of 1999 was the worst natural disaster of the twentieth century."
6) After the great snowstorm in 1988, a New York newspaper reported, "The blizzard of '88 caused more damage than any previous storm."

2. *Lifestyle: English for Work, Socializing and Travel* (Dubicka & O'Keefe, 2011): Exercise 5. Page 121.

Grammar: Reported speech. Change these sentences into reported speech. Use *say* or *tell* in your answers.

1) Your CEO: 'It is important to celebrate failure as well as success.'
2) Your colleague: 'Oops, I've made a mistake. I've sent you the wrong file again.'

3) Your supplier: 'Don't worry. The technician will come tomorrow.'
4) A football manager: 'We've just lost this match but we'll win next time!'
5) Your friend: 'I'm sorry, but I thought you said Tuesday. I can't come on Thursday.'
6) A designer: 'There are a lot of faults in the design so we're going to start again.'