

Speak about or speak of?
Topic marker variation in English communication verbs

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Some English verbs, e.g. *speak* and *talk*, are characterized by variation in which speakers can choose between at least two prepositions for introducing the topic of a communication event. This is evident in, for example, the forms *talk about something* and *talk of something*. Considering that such alternatives are roughly synonymous and exchangeable in many contexts, it is interesting to examine why they are present in the language and what factors shape users' preferences for one topic marker over another.

Some explanations offered for the variation refer to the semantics of the topic-introducing prepositions. More specifically, it has been suggested that *about* and *of* offer different construals of the communication topic. By choosing *about*, speakers might want to indicate that they are considering various aspects of the topic at hand (Rudzka-Ostyn 2003: 181). Conversely, if they wish to imply a strict focus on the topic, they might prefer to complement the communication verb with *of* (Lindstromberg 2010: 207).

This talk will concentrate on the results of three studies aimed at testing this and other possible accounts of the *about/of* variation. The investigations are based on corpus material drawn from ARCHER (cf. e.g. Yáñez-Bouza 2011), the Time Magazine Corpus (Davies 2007–) and a collection of online diaries. The extracted data samples are coded for selected linguistic characteristics using feature analysis (Gries 1999) and inspected with multivariate statistical techniques.

References

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