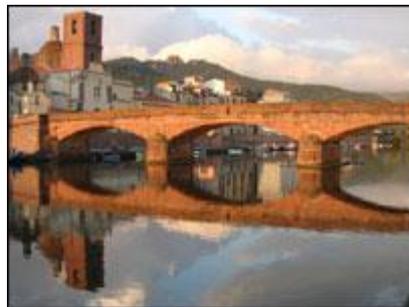


Ask about English

Say / speak / tell



BBC WORLD SERVICE LEARNING ENGLISH



bbclearningenglish.com
© British Broadcasting Corporation 2005

BBC Learning English – Ask about English

Available online at:

www.bbclearningenglish.com/radio/specials/1535_questionanswer

A question from Dmitrij in Latvia:

Hello! I am learning English by myself (excluding BBC Learning English!) My question was... what is the difference between 'tell', 'say', and 'speak'? Thank you!

Catherine Walter answers:

Hello Dmitrij. It's not surprising that you find these confusing because as far as meaning goes these three words *mean* more or less the same thing. It's more a question of how we use them, of patterns of use. So let me try to tell you about those.

With 'tell' we usually say *who* is told. You could say there is a personal object, so: 'Can you tell me what's happened?' We say, 'me'.

With 'say' we don't usually say who is told. So you might say 'please say each word clearly and distinctly'. And if we *do* say who is told, we use the word 'to', so: 'He said goodbye to me as if we would never see one another again'.

Now... There's another limit on the usage of 'tell'. We only use 'tell' to mean instruct or inform. 'I told him to wait for me on the platform'... that's an instruction. "My father used to tell me wonderful stories" - informing me.

'Say' can be used for any kind of talking. So here are three sentences where you could not use 'tell':

She said 'Where have you been?'

So I said what a good idea.

Maureen said 'What's the matter?'

We use 'tell' without a personal object in a few expressions, that are kind of fixed expressions like *tell the truth*, *tell the time* and *tell the difference*.

And we use 'say' before words like *a word*, *a name*, or *a sentence*. An example would be: 'Don't say a word.'

That's 'tell' and 'say'. You also asked about 'speak'. We use 'speak' to mean 'talk formally', and when we do use 'speak', we use the word 'to' if there's a personal object. So you could say, 'I spoke to him severely' or 'She spoke to our teachers' association last year'.

And of course we use it when we're talking about people's language ability: 'Do you speak English?' And you do, and I hope this will help you be happier with the way you speak it.

Catherine Walter is the Course Leader of the MA in Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) at the Institute of Education, University of London, where she also investigates second language reading comprehension and supervises doctoral students. She is the co-author with Michael Swan of The Good Grammar Book and How English Works.

Audio available online at:

www.bbclearningenglish.com/radio/specials/1535_questionanswer