

“Say”-ing without a Voice*

Travis Major & Richard Stockwell

University of California, Los Angeles; Christ Church, University of Oxford

1. Introduction

This paper analyses the argument structure of the verb “say”, with special reference to its locative uses. A prototypical use of “say” involves an agentive, animate subject and an internal argument related to speech, as in (1); but “say” can also have an inanimate subject, as in (2) (cf. Grimshaw 2015, Anand et al. 2017):

- (1) Mom says “Slow down!”
- (2) The sign says “Slow down!”

Further to (2), we introduce discussion of locative uses of “say” involving a PP. A full DP can be in subject position, with a pronominal object of P, as in (3); or vice versa, as in (4):

- (3) The sign says “Slow down!” on it.
- (4) It says “Slow down!” on the sign.

We offer an analysis of “say” that covers (1)-(4). We argue that the VP-internal structure of “say” is consistent, introducing ‘linguistic material’ as an internal argument; with VP-external structure responsible for differences in agentivity and event structure. While (1) is eventive, involving an Agent introduced by Voice, “say” does not inherently require either. *The sign* can be an Agent in (2), but can also be introduced by a distinct Voice head as the “Holder” of a state (Kratzer 1996; cf. Grimshaw’s 2015 “Location” and Anand et al.’s 2017 “Repository-of-Information”). And while (2) can be eventive, (3) and (4) with a PP are obligatorily stative, and the *it* subject in (4) is expletive.

*Many thanks to audiences at NELS 51 and UCLA’s Syntax Seminar; three anonymous NELS reviewers; Hilda Koopman, Maria Kouneli, Ethan Poole, Carson Schütze, Dominique Sportiche, Tim Stowell, Harold Torrence, and Matt Tyler. The errors are ours.

The next section details the argument and event structure of “say”. Our analysis follows in section 3. Section 4 discusses matters arising, including implications for the abstract light verb SAY (Grimshaw 2015). Section 5 concludes.

2. The argument and event structure of “say”

This section (i) considers the linguistic material argument of “say”; (ii) tests for the agentivity and eventivity vs. stativity of (1)-(4); and (iii) argues for the expletive status of *it* in (4).

2.1 Linguistic material

We note three things about linguistic material (LM) (Grimshaw 2015), which “say” introduces across all its uses. First, LM can be syntactically realised in various ways. As shown in (5), LM can take the form of direct quotation, indirect quotation, or a DP,¹ regardless of whether the subject is animate (a) or inanimate (b), and the presence a PP (c, d):²

- (5)
- a. John said { “I like cheese” / that he likes cheese / something about cheese }.
 - b. The sign said { “Quite please!” / to shut up / something rude }.
 - c. The label says { “Do not reheat” on it / on it not to reheat after cooking / three things on it }.
 - d. It says { “Wash with like colours” / that you should wash it with like colours / only one thing } on the label.

Second, the internal argument of “say” cannot refer to non-linguistic material, such as pictures, as shown by the contrasting pairs in (6):³

- (6)
- a. *John said a picture of a deer.
 - b. John described a picture of deer.
 - c. *The sign says a picture of deer (on it).
 - d. The sign says to watch out for deer (on it).
 - e. *It says a picture of deer on the sign.
 - f. It says to watch out for deer on the sign.

¹Though see Grimshaw (2015:89ff.) for some reservations regarding the generality of LM realised as a DP.

²There is a relationship between heaviness and the preferred order of LM and PP that we do not analyse, viz. (5c). We assume the PP-LM order is derived from underlying LM-PP by extraposition, as commonly assumed for “Heavy NP shift” (Ross 1967, Overfelt 2015). We present examples in what we judge to be the ‘preferred’ order throughout.

³For (6c) and (6e) respectively, cf.:

- (i)
- a. The sign has a picture of a deer on it.
 - b. There is a picture of a deer on the sign.

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Third, the LM argument of “say” is obligatory, per (7) (cf. Grimshaw 2015:80, ex. 3):⁴

- (7) a. *John said.
- b. *The sign says.
- c. *It says on the sign.

2.2 Agentivity and eventhood

We adopt Kratzer’s (1996) division among external arguments, illustrated in (8). Where Agents are subjects of dynamic events (a), Holders are subjects of states (b):

- (8) a. Mittie fed a dog. Agent
- b. Mittie owns a dog. Holder

This subsection applies some standard tests for agentivity and eventivity, listed in (9) (e.g., Rothmayr 2009, Alexiadou and Iordăchioaia 2014), to “say”:⁵

- (9) a. volitional adverbs (e.g., *deliberately*) go with agents
- b. manner modification (e.g., *with enthusiasm*) targets events
- c. anaphoric follow-ups (e.g., *this*) refer to events
- d. states are odd in the progressive
- e. *for*-modification targets states

With an animate subject in (10), the tests indicate that “say” is agentive and eventive:

- (10) Mary ...
- a. ...deliberately said/says “Do not go out!” Agentive? ✓
- b. ...said/says “Do not go out!” with enthusiasm. Eventive? ✓
- c. ...said “Do not go out!” This happened yesterday. Eventive? ✓
- d. ...was saying “Do not go out!” Eventive? ✓
- e. #...said “Do not go out!” for over an hour. Stative? ✗

With inanimate subjects, both agentive/eventive and stative readings are in principle available in (11) and (12), modulo the inherent qualities of the nouns.⁶ For the stative reading (e), the external argument must be interpreted as the physical object rather than its communicative component:

⁴Setting aside contexts that license Null Complement Anaphora (Depiante 2000).

⁵We vary inanimate subjects, tense, and LM in an effort to make the judgments clearer.

⁶We assume a role for “teleological capability” (Higginbotham 1997, Folli and Harley 2008) — the inherent qualities and abilities of an entity to participate in the eventuality denoted by a predicate. For example, kettles can serve as agents of unergatives like *whistle*, while rocks cannot.

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- (11) The radio ...
- a. ...deliberately said/says “Do not go out!” Agentive? ✓
 - b. ...said/says “Do not go out!” with enthusiasm. Eventive? ✓
 - c. ...said “Do not go out!” This happened yesterday. Eventive? ✓
 - d. ...was saying “Do not go out!” Eventive? ✓
 - e. ...said “SNY” for 5 minutes (until someone cleaned the ‘O’). Stative? ✓
- (12) The newspaper/sign ...
- a. ...deliberately said/says “Do not go out!” Agentive? ✓
 - b. ?...said “Do not go out!” with enthusiasm. Eventive? ✓
 - c. ?...said “Do not go out!” This happened yesterday. Eventive? ✓
 - d. ?...was saying “Do not go out!” Eventive? ✓
 - e. ...said “Do not go out” for 10 days (until it was replaced). Stative? ✓

With a locative PP, an agentive/eventive reading is unavailable in (13):⁷

- (13) The shirt/book/sign ...
- a. *...deliberately says/said “Watford” on it Agentive? ✗
 - b. *...says/said “Watford” on it with enthusiasm. Eventive? ✗
 - c. *...said “Watford” on it. This happened yesterday. Eventive? ✗
 - d. *...was saying “Watford” on it. Eventive? ✗
 - e. ...said “Watford” on it for 5 days (then the writing faded). Stative? ✓

An agentive/eventive reading remains unavailable with an *it* subject in (14):

- (14)
- a. *It deliberately says/said “Watford” on the shirt/book/sign. Agentive? ✗
 - b. *It says/said “Watford” on the s/b/s with enthusiasm. Eventive? ✗
 - c. *It said “Watford” on the s/b/s. This happened yesterday. Eventive? ✗
 - d. *It was saying “Watford” on the s/b/s. Eventive? ✗
 - e. It said “Watford” on the s/b/s for 5 days (then the writing faded). Stative? ✓

In sum, “say” with animate subjects is agentive and eventive (10); “say” with inanimate subjects can be either agentive and eventive or stative (11, 12); and “say” with locative PPs is stative (13, 14).

2.3 *It* is expletive

This subsection argues that the *it* subject in the locative use of “say” in (4) is expletive:

- (4) It says “Slow down!” on the sign.

⁷Some speakers marginally accept (13b) and (14b) with manner modification targeting e.g. the boldness of the font. See also note 20.

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The referential possibilities for *it* are indicated in (15). *It* might corefer with (i) the DP complement of P; (j) the linguistic material; or (k) something else in the discourse. However, these three referential possibilities are exhausted across (16)-(18):

(15) $It_{\text{expl}/*i/*j/*k}$ says “Slow down!”_j on the sign_i.

In (16), *it* does not track the plural complement of P (i) in number (a).⁸ Doing so with *they* results in ungrammaticality (b), attributable to a Condition C effect:⁹

(16) a. It says “Slow down!” on the sign_i.
b. *They_i say “Slow down!” on the sign_i.

Similarly in (17), *it* does not track plural LM (j) in number (a,c), and doing so with *they* is ungrammatical (b,d):

(17) a. It says [“Slow down!” and “Stay safe!”]_j on the sign.
b. *They_j say [“Slow down!” and “Stay safe!”]_j on the sign.
c. It says our names_j on the sign.
d. *They_j say our names_j on the sign.

And in (18), the failure of substituting a full DP (a) or demonstrative *that* (b) shows that there is no plausible discourse reference for *it*:

(18) a. *The message/advert/writing/sign_k says “Slow down!” on the sign.
b. *That_k says “Slow down!” on the sign.

Further evidence for the expletivity of *it* comes from Postal and Pullum’s (1988:636, ex. 1) emphatic reflexive test, illustrated in (19). In contrast to a clausal subject (a), an expletive subject (b) does not support an emphatic reflexive:

(19) a. For him to smoke is itself illegal.
b. *It is itself illegal for him to smoke.

Applied to “say” in (20), emphatic reflexives are allowed with animate (a) and inanimate (b) subjects, but not in the crucial case of an *it* subject combined with a PP (c):¹⁰

⁸Cf. Bolinger (1973:265), who writes of “the avoidance of *it* for plural locations: **It says in the Bible and in the Koran that . . . , *It says in today’s papers that . . .*”

⁹Reassuringly, the pronoun does track the full DP in number from inside the PP:

(i) a. *The sign_i say “Slow down!” on it_i.
b. The sign_i say “Slow down!” on them_i.

¹⁰Another of Postal and Pullum’s (1988:636, ex. 3a, c) tests yields the same result in (i). While pronominal subjects can coordinate (a), expletive subjects cannot (b), including with “say” (c, d):

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- (20) a. John (himself) said “Slow down”.
 b. The sign (itself) said “Slow down” (on it).
 c. It (*itself) said “Slow down” on the sign.

In conclusion, the *it* subject in the locative use of “say” in (4) is expletive.¹¹ That said, the arguments in this subsection have all relied on (the full DP in) PP to check for number agreement and Condition C effects. Without the PP, *it* could well refer to something in the discourse:^{12, 13}

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- (i) a. He and it were respectively proved to be a person and claimed to be a robot.
 b. *It and there were/was respectively proved to be raining and claimed to be floods in the valley.
 c. *It and there respectively said “Slow down!” on the sign and arrived a police car.
 d. *He and it respectively remained silent and said “Slow down!” on the sign.

And in (ii), adapting Bolinger’s (1973:266) (a), the lack of zeugmaticity tells in favour of expletivity in (b):

- (ii) a. It was hot and just about impossible to get anything done.
 b. It was raining and so said on the sign to take care.

¹¹Similar seems true of Spanish. In (i), an overt pronoun is not allowed with a locative PP (a), since Spanish lacks expletive subjects (b):

- (i) a. (*Eso) Dice “disminuya la velocidad” en el cartel.
 it says slow the speed on the sign
 b. *Eso/*el llueve.
 it rains

French, however, seems different. In (ii), a demonstrative pronoun, *ça*, must appear in subject position with a locative PP (a), not expletive *il* (b):

- (ii) a. Çà/*il dit “ralentir” sur le panneau.
 it/EXPL says slow.down on the sign
 b. Il/*ça pleut.
 EXPL/it rains

¹²Our best effort at determining whether “say” can have an expletive *it* subject without a locative PP is (i). An adjunct manner PP *in the magazine’s customary style* houses the location *the magazine*, and the sentence is acceptable. But *it* cannot corefer with *the magazine*, due to Condition C (a). For sure, discourse referents are possible for *it*, per the substitution(s) in (b). But the awkwardness of adding the emphatic reflexive *itself* in (c) suggests that such discourse referents are difficult to recover out of the blue, with *it* in the baseline sentence most naturally parsed as expletive:

- (i) It said “Read on!” in the magazine’s customary style.
 a. *It_i said “Read on!” in the magazine_i’s customary style.
 b. The ((last two words of) the sentence in the) article said “Read on!” in the magazine_i’s customary style.
 c. ??It itself said “Read on!” in the magazine_i’s customary style.

¹³It remains to pinpoint what kind of expletive *it* is. See McFadden (2004: esp. 322f.) for relevant discussion.

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(21) It_k (itself) said “Slow down!”

2.4 Summary

With this section, we have offered a detailed description of the “say” data in (1)-(4), whose properties are summarized in (22):

(22) *The argument and event structure of “say”*

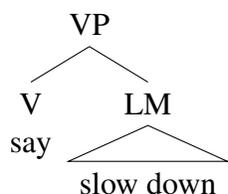
	Subject	Eventive	Stative
(1) Mom says “Slow down!”	Agent	✓	✗
(2) The sign says “Slow down!”	Agent/Holder	✓	✓
(3) The sign says “Slow down!” on it.	Holder	✗	✓
(4) It says “Slow down!” on the sign.	Expletive	✗	✓

The data support an analysis whereby the VP-internal structure of “say” remains consistent, with higher functional and aspectual structure further specifying the meaning (Borer 1994, Kratzer 1996, Travis 2000, Pykkänen 2008, Ramchand 2008, a.o). The next section proposes an analysis in this vein.

3. Analysis

Since linguistic material is obligatory (section 2.1), we propose that the VP-internal structure in (23) is common to all instances of “say”:

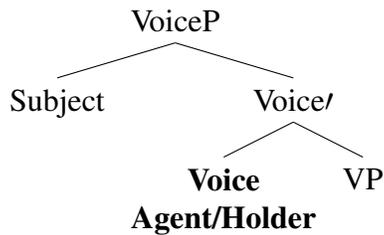
(23) *VP-internal syntax of “say”*



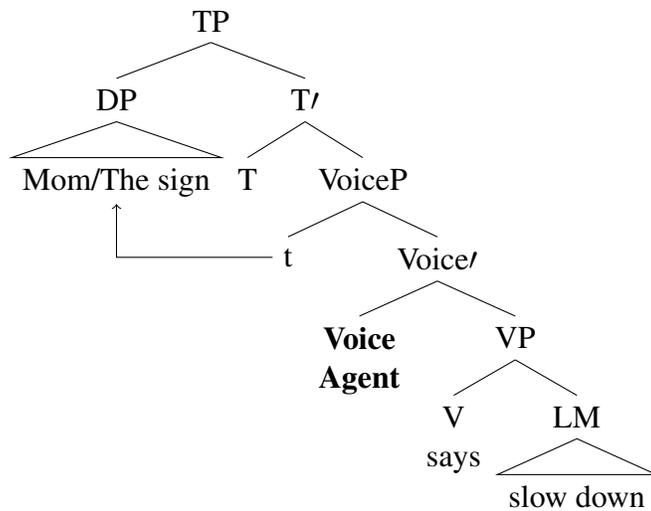
A VP-external Voice head introduces the external argument (Kratzer 1996, et seq.). Voice can be Agent or Holder, as bolded in (24).¹⁴ Agents correlate with dynamic events, Holders with states:

¹⁴This morphologically unmarked alternation between Agent and Holder Voice is reminiscent of causative/inchoative (i) or *fill* predicates (ii) in English:

- (i)
 - a. Mary melted the ice.
 - b. The ice melted.
- (ii)
 - a. Mary filled the cup with pebbles.
 - b. Pebbles fill the cup.

(24) *External arguments*

Across animacy lines — both animate *Mom* (1) and inanimate *the sign* (2) — Agent subjects are introduced by Agent Voice, as in (25):¹⁵

(25) *Agent Voice*

Holders of states, as unambiguously with a PP, are introduced by Holder Voice, as in (26):¹⁶

¹⁵While passivisation is already odd with “say” in (ib) (cf. Grimshaw 2015:91), the degradation increases through (i) in the predicted direction, based on the presence of (Agent) Voice:

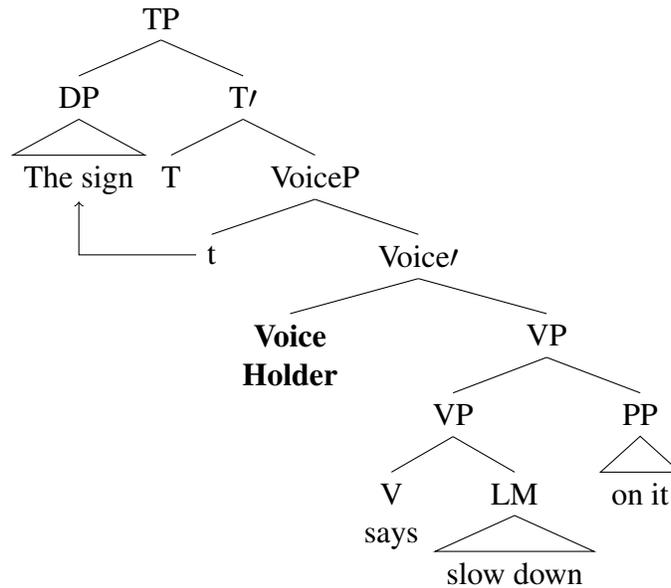
- (i) a. Mary said “Get out!”.
- b. ?“Get out!” was said by Mary.
- c. The note said “Get out!”.
- d. ??“Get out!” was said by the note.
- e. The note said “Get out!” on it.
- f. *“Get out!” was said by the note on it.
- g. It said “Get out!” on the note.
- h. *“Get out!” was said by it on the note.

¹⁶While the ungrammaticality of (ia) does not follow from our analysis, similar seems true of “have” structures (ib), as discussed by Myler (2016). We suspect that the PP is a Binding Domain for the purposes of Conditions A and B:

- (i) a. *The sign says “Slow down!” on itself.
- b. The tree has a nest in it(*self).

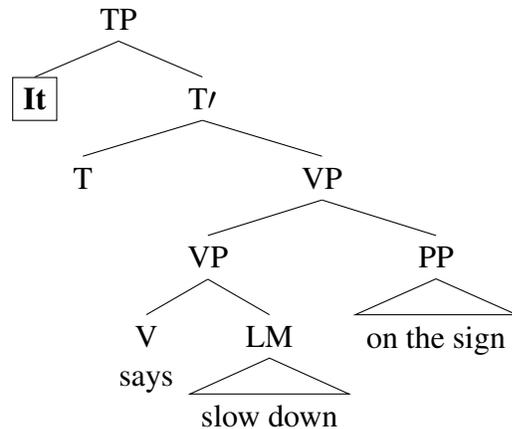
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(26) *Holder Voice*



In the absence of Voice, expletive *it* is inserted in subject position to satisfy the Extended Projection Principle (EPP) (Chomsky 1982), as in (27):

(27) *No Voice — expletive insertion*



In sum: “say” takes LM to form VP; differences in agentivity and eventivity are modulated by Voice, Agent vs. Holder; and the absence of Voice necessitates expletive insertion.¹⁷

4. Discussion

This section argues against an alternative analysis in terms of raising, before discussing Goals, locative humans, and further analytical directions.

¹⁷Alternatively, expletive insertion could be mediated by “Expletive Voice” (Alexiadou et al. 2015: ch.4).

4.1 Against raising

Our analysis does not involve any transformational relationships among “say” structures. Elsewhere, expletive *it* is involved in raising alternations (Postal 1974). In (28), for example, the subject raises out of a non-finite clause (a) where expletive *it* is inserted with a finite clause (b):

- (28) a. Mary seems to be happy.
b. It seems that Mary is happy.

Since we argue that *it* is expletive in (4), it might be tempting to relate (4) to (2) or (3) via raising. That is, *the sign* would be base generated where we see it in (4), inside PP, before raising to subject position to derive (2) and/or (3):

- (4) It says “Slow down!” on the sign.
(2) The sign says “Slow down!”
(3) The sign says “Slow down!” on it.

We make three points against a raising analysis.

First, if raising is motivated as movement for Case, the proposed base-position of *the sign* — the complement of P — is already a Case position.

Second, (29) is ungrammatical:

- (29) *The sign says “Slow down!” on.

To derive (2), *on* would have to disappear. And to derive (3), *it* would have to appear in the trace position of raising, despite English generally lacking resumptive pronouns.

Third, A-movement reconstructs for variable binding. In (30), the bound variable reading of (a) persists after raising in (b):

- (30) a. It seems to every author_i that their_i book is wonderful.
b. Their_i book seems to every author_i to be wonderful.

In (31) with “say”, however, the bound variable reading of (a) does not persist in (b):

- (31) a. It says every author_i’s name on their_i book.
b. *Their_i book says every author_i’s name (on it).

In conclusion, it does not seem tenable to relate (4) to (2) or (3) via raising.

4.2 Goals require Agents

A Goal argument is only possible with agentive “say”. The result of adding *to us* to (1)-(4) is (32). A Goal is good with an animate subject (a) and an agentive inanimate (b); but bad with a locative PP (c, d):¹⁸

- (32) a. Mom said “Slow down” to us.
b. ?The sign said “Slow down!” to us.
c. *The sign said “Slow down!” to us on it.
d. *It said “Slow down!” to us on the sign.

There thus seems to be a connection between a particular realization of Voice as Agent Voice and the licensing of a Goal.¹⁹

4.3 Locative humans

Consider (33) in a context where Mary has a tattoo that reads “Kayla”:

- (33) a. *Mary says “Kayla” (on her (arm)).
b. ?Mary’s arm says “Kayla”.
c. Mary’s arm says “Kayla” on it.
d. It says “Kayla” on Mary(’s arm).

In this context, an animate subject is bad (a), regardless of the presence and content of PP. An inanimate subject, meanwhile, is good in (b) and (c). Moreover, an animate can be good as a Location in (d). This suggests that the problem in (a) is the clash between interpreting *Mary* as both an Agent and a Location at the same time.

4.4 Implications for SAY

The abstract light verb SAY (Grimshaw 2015; cf. Kratzer 2016) has been proposed as a universal semantic primitive, akin to BE and HAVE (Dowty 1979, Talmy 1985, Jackendoff 1992, Hale and Keyser 1993). The verb “say” is one realization of SAY, which is a silent component of communicative predicates more broadly (e.g. SAY + *ask* = [æsk], SAY +

¹⁸For Grimshaw (2015:87, ex. 31), an inanimate subject renders the clause stative, making it incompatible with a Goal (ia). We find (ia), like (32b), reasonably natural, with an agentive interpretation possible. However, we find (ib) and (32d) with the addition of a locative PP distinctly bad:

- (i) a. ??The {sign, poster, book, article} said to the tourists that the park was closed.
b. *The {sign, poster, book, article} said to the tourists that the park was closed on it.

¹⁹There are multiple syntactic analyses on the market for the connection between Voice and Goals. Candidates include a high applicative structure, where Voice selects an ApplP as its complement (Pylkkänen 2008); or Voice selecting a small clause whose subject is a Goal (Harley 1995, 2002). Some consequences are explored from a typological perspective in Major (in prep.). See also Landau (2020) on Goals and control.

scream = [skɪm]). This final subsection considers implications of our analysis of “say” for SAY with regard to agentivity and Voice.

Grimshaw (2015:87, ex. 35) discusses agentivity as follows, with respect to (34): “All SAY verbs should occur with non-agentive subjects in principle. Whether they do or not will depend upon the demands of their discourse role or mode. Certain discourse roles are clearly compatible with non-agentive subjects.”

- (34) a. The survey asks whether people work more than 40 hours a week.
 b. The article comments that most people lie about their work habits.

On our analysis, the examples in (34) are agentive. Accordingly in (35), a volitional adverb and Goal can be added, but not a locative PP:

- (35) a. The survey (deliberately) asks (readers) whether people work more than 40 hours a week (*on/in it).
 b. The article (deliberately) comments (to readers) that most people lie about their work habits (*in it).

Further to “say”, Grimshaw (2015) offers the taxonomy of SAY-predicates in (36):

- (36) a. Discourse role: verbs of asserting, ordering, questioning, etc.: e.g. *ask, announce, assert, maintain, note, order, remark, report, tell, and wonder*
 b. Mode verbs: encode other parts of the saying event, decomposing into:
 i. SAY-by-means: e.g. *whisper, mutter, grunt, scream*
 ii. SAY-with-attitude: e.g. *gripe, bitch, dispute*

Sampling from Grimshaw’s taxonomy in (37) and (38), there appears to be a strong preference — if not requirement — that the external argument is an Agent, with “say” and possibly a subset of SAY-by-means predicates as exceptions:²⁰

- (37) a. The sign says not to feed the animals (on it) “say”
 b. The sign asks/tells tourists not to feed the animals (*on it). Discourse role
 c. ??The sign mutters/screams not to feed the animals (*on it). SAY-by-means
 d. *The sign bitches (at tourists) not to feed the animals (on it). SAY-with-attitude
- (38) a. It says not to feed the animals on the sign(s). “say”
 b. *It asks/tells tourists not to feed the animals on the sign(s). Discourse role
 c. *It mutters/screams not to feed the animals on the sign(s). SAY-by-means
 d. *It bitches (at tourists) not to feed the animals on the sign(s). SAY-with-attitude

²⁰(37c) and (38c) are marginally acceptable for some speakers on a coerced manner reading. The availability of such readings varies across the SAY-by-means class; “scream”, for instance, is easier to accommodate than “mutter”. Cf. Grimshaw (2015:88, exx. 36, 37), and recall note 7.

Given the ungrammaticality with PPs (c, d), we conclude that the verb “say” is unique among SAY predicates in showing a Voice alternation.²¹

5. Conclusion

This paper has analysed the argument structure of “say”, with special reference to its locative uses involving PPs. In sum, “say” always takes LM as an internal argument,²² while VP-external structure determines agentivity, eventivity, and expletivity. We thus hope to have contributed novel insights to the literature on SAY-predicates (Grimshaw 2015, Anand et al. 2017). Implications for the cross-linguistic distribution and behavior of “say”/SAY are a matter of ongoing research (Major in prep.).

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²¹There are other verbs compatible with PPs and *it* subjects beyond the scope of this paper. For example (i), Matt Tyler brings to our attention the googleable example in (a). However, since *mention* is incompatible with direct quotation (b), it does not qualify as a SAY predicate (Grimshaw 2015). An interesting (counter-)example, again from Matt Tyler, is *read* (c):

- (i) a. It mentioned on the booking form that there is no shower in the room.
b. *The booking form mentioned, “There is no shower in the room.”
c. It read “Hamburgers” on the sign.

²²Our analysis is compatible with treating “say” as SAY across all its uses. Cf. Grimshaw (2015:80, ex. 1; 87, ex. 34), for whom non-agentive “say” is not an instantiation of SAY.

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