



## **The Similarities and Differences of “Say” and “Tell” (A Corpus Based Study)**

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### **Abstract**

English foreign learners often have difficulty in distinguishing the collocation of the English words. The words produced may seem acceptable in terms of mean, yet it may not be common for native speakers of English. When one assumes that these words “tell” and “say” have similar in meaning, but in fact they have different in the use of context. There are several ways to find out the most appropriate collocations of various words one of them is by using corpora. This study used “English-Corpora.org (iWeb)”, “British National Corpus (BNC)”. This study is an attempt to explore the similarities and differences of two synonymous words by using English Corpora.org to find the collocation. The result shows the similarity is that both words have similar meanings and the concordance one. The similarity also seen in the findings of context. The word “say” is commonly found in the spoken context and fiction context. In the same context but different rate position, the word “tell” is commonly found in the fiction context and spoken activities. The differences are found in the collocation and the frequency rate.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The learners of English for Foreign language often have difficulties in using synonymous words in certain spoken or written contexts. What they want to convey to their friends is about “simple sentence”, however, others will use “easy sentence”. Another case in English class, when a student wants to say “big body” instead of “large body. Those confusing words bring the communication has a gap. It also creates misunderstanding and misperception when

those synonymous words used in inappropriate context.

This study focuses on the similarities and differences of the two synonymous words “say” and “tell”. Those two words are English daily words that all English speakers/ writers, listeners and readers of English frequently found and used them. The researcher commonly found that English learners, specially her students are confused to use those words in the appropriate context of

English that most of native speakers used them. This research is conducted to share the findings about the right definitions, frequency of the words, concordances, collocations in the context. It is corpus-based study where all data are gained and confirmed based on the corpora.

Corpus linguistics is quite different from most other topics in linguistics study. It is an area which focuses on a set of procedures, or methods for studying language (Gries, 2009). Many corpus linguists seem to be witnessing as well in finding and utilizing the data. The data used could be many papers using corpora as the primary data or using internet data. In short, Corpus linguistics relate to discussion of language and the use of language in the real life using the authentic data written or oral form like newspaper, books, academic papers magazines, social media text, literature, speech and conversation.

Different perspective in discussing about what linguistics corpus is many corpus Linguists say that it is a method to be used to analyze, investigate, describe and judge the authentic data either spoken or written ones. If a linguist investigate how lexical items become more used in grammatical markers so the result of the investigation will be interpreted and described based on the theory taken. It means that corpus linguistics can be used to describe linguistics theories used in certain discussion.

Corpus linguistics is the study of language data on a large scale-the computer-aided analysis of very extensive collections of

transcribed utterances or written texts (McEnery & Hardie, 2011) . It is an area which focuses upon a set of procedures or methods for studying language. The procedures are still developing. The development of corpus Linguistics has also spawned or to facilitate the exploration of new theories of language, then the theories which draw the inspiration from attested language use and the findings drawn from it.

Corpus linguistics differs from other areas of theoretical subdisciplines of linguistics. Bibber and Reppen recognize that the distinctive characteristic of corpus linguistics is the claim that is possible to actually “represent” a domain of language use with a corpus of texts, and possible to empirically describe linguistics patterns of use through analysis of that corpus (Biber & Reppen, 2015).

According to Lindquist (Lindquist, 2009) the findings and discussion of the Corpus based study presented in the concordance, frequency and collocation. Concordance displays the data in the form of the words used based on the context . It shows the context which the words is used in different situations and topics. While Frequency is about the appearance of the display data that is frequently used in some written or spoken context. This information will help the people who use the language know which word is appropriate to represent the sentence of language. The last is collocation reveal restriction on which words can go together and which words do not go

together with. Collocations are not grammar rules, they depend on probability rather than being absolute ones. In short, Collocation is the examples of how languages can be put together (Davies, 2015).

For the study of English words/phrase even the sentences, the researcher can use English-Corpora-org” (<https://www.english-corpora.org>) British national corpus (BNC) [www.english-corpora.org/bnc/](https://www.english-corpora.org/bnc/). The researcher also can gain the data from Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) that display words, frequency, Collocation, concordance.

There are three relevance studies that used Corpus based study, They discussed about collocation, frequency and concordance of synonymous words, First, the previous studies that explored in the use of daily language, discussed in Bahasa Indonesia is about ‘ The use of Corpus in Meaning Analysis of the synonyms: “mau”, “ingin”, “hendak” dan “akan” written by Dewi Puspita (Puspita, 2016)). It is about finding the right synonym meanings about those for terms. Another previous study is” Concordance-Based Study of the Use of Reporting Verbs as Rhetorical Devices in Academic Paper” , written By Joel Bloch. It is about examining the terms in reporting verbs in academic papers (Bloch, 2010). Second, study about “Skinny, Slim. Dan Thin: Analisis Berbasis Korpus, Kata Sifat Identik dan Implikasinya pada Pengajaran Bahasa Inggris” written by Islamiyah M, Fajri M (2019). This paper investigates the collocation and concordance

of those three word (Islamiyah & Fajri, 2019). Third, the article written by Sugeha and Nur Farida dalam Brenzinger, under the title “Perbandingan Kolokasi Kata Ibu dan Bunda Dalam Korpus Bahasa Indonesia”. The finding of this research was the word “ibu” is used more frequently used than the term “bunda” (Brenzinger, 2016). This article published in proceeding of Language Maintenance and Shift (LAMAS 6, 2016).

Those three studies discussed some words that seems to have the same meanings and use in daily language production. However after some researchers conducted the research by using Corpus based study there are findings that could bring valuable inputs to the users of language. This study will focus on finding the information about:

1. What is the similarity of the word “say” and “tell”?
2. What is the difference of the word “say” and “tell”?

This research will further discuss about the similarity and difference in using “say” and “tell” in having appropriate communication to avoid misunderstanding and miscommunication. This research also will be useful for the learners of English to use the right word in order to certain context.

## METHOD

The two main verbs (say & tell) are the words used as the object of this study. They are considered to be synonymous as their meanings are similar according to ‘Oxford

Advance Learners Dictionary” (Oxford, 2015) and Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (Longman, 2010). To find out the information regarding to the similarities and differences of these two words of their collocation the data is taken from “iWeb”(iWeb, 2018) of English-Corpora.org” (<https://www.english-corpora.org>) and to find the frequencies of the those two verbs (say & tell) the researcher gained the data from (BNC, n.d.) British national corpus (BNC). [www.english-corpora.org/bnc/](https://www.english-corpora.org/bnc/).

The data collection and analysis procedures involves several steps; First the meanings of these two words are compared to identify whether they can be considered as synonymous or not. Afterward, the meanings in the dictionaries are crosschecked with the actual usage found in BNC. The final step deals with exploring the similarities and differences in the collocation of the two synonymous words. Here, BNC is used to find out the collocations of these two words. Then, it is further analyzed based on the frequency and context.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The words “say” and “tell” are very common words in English daily language. The language learners can find them in almost any context of language situations. Non English learners are also trapped in understanding these words when they reading English text, messages, newspapers, magazine, tabloids or any social media used by them. For this kind of situation, English learners or non English

learners often get problems in gaining the appropriate meanings and contexts of these two words. Then, they are trapped in the condition of misconception and misunderstanding. This study attempts to find out the similarities and differences, especially in terms of their collocations and frequencies.

### Definition

First of all to make sure the words “say” and “tell” are synonymous, their definitions are compared using two dictionaries: ‘Oxford Advance Learners Dictionary” (2015) and Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2010) compared to English Corpora.org (iWeb). The summary of the meanings are presented below:

**Table 1: definitions of “say” and “tell”**

1) Words	2) Oxford Advance English dictionary (2015)	3) Longman Dictionary of comporary English (2010)	4) English Corpora.org (iWeb)
5) SAY	6) To speak or to tell something/ information; to repeat the words; to give instructions; to express opinion, to make thoughts; to show something, to suggest something	7) Express something in a word; give information in the form of words, numbers, pictures, clocks, signs, messages; to talk about what someone means; think that something is true show a sign of something, to speak and suggest something	8) express in words; report or maintain; express a supposition
9) TELL	10) To give information; to express something in words; to let someone know the secret; to order; to advise; to suggest; to judge something, to recognize the difference; to affect somebody	11) To communicate something (feeling); to show something, to give information, to say what somebody should do; to recognize something; to warn someone	12) Express in words; let something be known; narrate or give a detailed account of something/someone

From the table above it can be inferred that the words “say” and “tell” can be considered as synonymous words, even in both dictionaries. They have other senses/ different in some parts, however most of the meaning have the same senses. It is shown clearly that those two words ‘say’ and ‘tell’ has similar in meaning seen from the English-corpora.org (iWeb). The word “say” and “tell” have similar meaning. In specific one, “say” focuses on the words someone said, and “tell” focuses more on the content or the message of what someone said. However, they also have different in the grammar use. The word “tell” is used for indirect object while “say” is used for the sentence that has direct object. In conclusion, the word “say” and “tell” basically have the same general meaning. And difference in the grammar use.

### Concordance

Comparing the definitions from the dictionaries with the actual usage of the words found in taken from “iWeb” of English-Corpora-org” and to find the frequencies of the those two verbs ( say & tell) the researcher gained the data from British national corpus (BNC).

Based on English-Corpora.org, the concordances for each word “say” and “tell”, it can be concluded that “say” and “tell” has basic similar meaning “ to express something using words, to report and to let something be known’. Basically they have the same meaning, However, the word “tell” is used to

inform more detail information rather than the word “say”. The difference is in the actual use. The word “tell”+ indirect object\_ to infinitive, e.g. “We tell them to be quiet”. The word “say”+ to infinitive to report command and instruction, e.g. She said, I don’t know what you mean”. The difference one is the word “tell” is used to express more detail information/something like report or feelings, indirect objects with words such as “the truth”, “a lie”, “a joke”, “a story”. While the word “say” to report a command or instruction. So, the users of English can use these synonymous words in appropriate purpose of talks and context. Below, are the examples of concordance of these two verbs “say” and “tell”: can be taken in the usage of certain contexts, as follows:

- a. Anti-Maoist force greyhounds were injured in the firing. He said a helicopter was rushed to the scene to bring the injured.
- b. To support features, I get a little nervous about running, say an ethanol plants with a chep PLC to save a buck
- c. I hope this is correct time to reveal his truth, Shifay, says common. Lets go down and see what he speaks
- d. Really know what is going to happen. But like I told a lot of teams, my goal is to play professional football
- e. This Narrative especially given shaun of the dead seemed to tell all of the jokes there were to tell” Landon has somehow.

- f. To go into consecutive days lol, I have been told diarrhea is a side effect so I'm hoping I won't.

**Table 2. Concordance of the word “Tell”**

CONCORDANCE LINES (more)	
1 www.winnipegfreepress.com	really know what's going to happen. But like told teams, my goal is to play professional football
2 www.theage.com.au	workmanship. # The summary alleges Mr at one point told a mediator # "One day I am going to--"
3 vevex.co.uk	gods, angels, demons and spirits. # Numbers 22:21-34 tells a rather story where a man, Balaam, is travelling
4 abc40morsana.com	organization needs all the help it can get. # She told ABC FOX Mustang about one recent incident where a litter of
5 heyugays.com	this narrative, especially given Shaun of the Dead seemed to tell all of the jokes there were to tell "Landon has somehow
6 host.madison.com	to strengthen the tenure review process as well. # She told Berkeley approved of a tenure policy soon is crucial to have
7 healdove.com	to go in two consecutive days lol. I have been told diarrhea is a side effect so I'm hoping I won't
8 uni-watch.com	the outside. "I'm sure I do not have to tell everyone they I find all of this. Tod, you're
9 slatestarcode.com	known to be a major risk factor for Alzheimer's. They told half of them their test results, kept it secret from the
10 medicalkidnap.com	you! # The twins older brother defended his sister telling them that he did not need to threaten her like that.
11 basejumper.com	G" painted on the rock. Everyone kept laughing and telling them what a great name it was. He seemed perplexed about
12 www.bbc.com	the extent that Trump is having trouble getting speakers who can tell his story and tell the story he wants to tell about Hillary
13 www.albertaonline.com	in the direction of publicly available information. # You can tell how many wells we're drilling by the DOB Daily Oil Bulletin
14 prepaidphonemv.com	when I got my Galaxy Note 2. However, I was told I could have perfect data use in Virginia where it would switch
15 military-technologies.net	Republicans and the Tea Party movement of 2010. # We also told us (the military) that # "What an oral history project does
16 burlingtonfreepress.com	need to sign off on the new deal. # Simonelli told investors that there's "a minimal overlap" between the two
17 siverimes.com	him a notice of violation. Finally, what we were told is that are made in September and that the tenant has
18 www.shropshirestar.com	an aggressive form of breast cancer in May 2013 and was told he had been in September 2014. The pair married in February
19 why.org	level in the ground for winter frost protection. # Miles told Jack Without sufficient drainage, the buried crowns of
20 foreignpolicy.com	now-vic president accepted bribes. # Sources in Freetown told me that failure to pay bribes was the reason shipments of Ebola

**Table 3. Concordance of the word “say”**

CONCORDANCE LINES (more)	
1 www.canindia.com	anti-Maoist force Greyhounds were injured in the firing. # He said a helicopter was rushed to the scene to bring the injured
2 umbraco.com	?! # Code Review (Enterprise only) # They say a problem shared is a problem halved, right? So if
3 umbraco.net	to support features, I get a little nervous about naming any changes with "cheap" PLGs to save a buck
4 kgurbi.com	her for her kindness. In the letter he did not say anything about being bullied. # A day after Roy's suicide
5 vivo.org	we do not let anybody take us back. # She said we had crowd cheered. "Every elected official on this planet
6 techonund.com	reactive in AI regulation it's too late. # He said we're choosing to be bullied. # "I
7 hewpp.com	out an earbud. "You're cute. # She said before knowing her earbud ball. Pretending like nothing
8 www.venommorningstar.com	we're all focused directly on children and families. # said Cargerson # "We all work with a variety of kids
9 ishbaas.co.in	. I hope this is correct time to reveal his trust. # says Cargerson # "We all work with a variety of kids
10 www.uefa.com	looking forward to the attractive challenges ahead of us. # said Fawcett # "We all work with a variety of kids
11 metro.co.uk	the show, causing his popularity to plunge. # # Trump said he had begun to intimidate the other housemates, particularly
12 www.theshop.ie	16 and Pro Evolution 17. # CBS Football Relates said he had begun to intimidate the other housemates, particularly
13 sot.net	of the name Ectozoa, a long-lost city. # Daniel Balaban said he had begun to intimidate the other housemates, particularly
14 paperater.com	upon her husband. # Most palpable proofs. # said he had begun to intimidate the other housemates, particularly
15 excelmale.com	what is the precision of the test then? # said he had begun to intimidate the other housemates, particularly
16 www.wheelmag.com.au	a perfect, swirling storm of frustration. Let's just say I have completed that many three, five- and seven-point
17 pathguy.com	on Foucault. "If something can be said simply, say it simply so that the carpenter next door can understand you
18 vinnies.org.au	tired or sick or just plain sick and # He said he had begun to intimidate the other housemates, particularly
19 dreamviews.com	dream again. But hey Ding is great. # said he had begun to intimidate the other housemates, particularly
20 www.uefa.com	looking forward to the attractive challenges ahead of us. # said Fawcett # "We all work with a variety of kids

## Frequency

Based on In English-corpora.org, (iWeb), the frequency of the appearance in English context for the word “say” is 6.372.246 times. While, the frequency of the appearance in English context for the word “tell” is 3.008.553 times. It infers that the word “say” has higher frequency appearance in English context than the word “tell”.

**Table 4. Frequency of the word “say”**

iWeb: The 14 Billion Word Web Corpus			
SEARCH	FREQUENCY	CONTEXT	
ON CLICK: [CONTEXT] [TRANSLATE (??)] [GOOGLE] [IMAGE] [PRON/VIDEO] [BOOK] [HELP]			
HELP	[?] [CONTEXT] [ALL FORMS (SAMPLE): 100 200 500]	FREQ	
1	[?] [CONTEXT] [ALL FORMS (SAMPLE): 100 200 500]	6372246	

**Table 5. Frequency of the word “Tell”**

iWeb: The 14 Billion Word Web Corpus			
SEARCH	FREQUENCY	CONTEXT	
ON CLICK: [CONTEXT] [TRANSLATE (??)] [GOOGLE] [IMAGE] [PRON/VIDEO] [BOOK] [HELP]			
HELP	[?] [CONTEXT] [ALL FORMS (SAMPLE): 100 200 500]	FREQ	
1	[?] [CONTEXT] [ALL FORMS (SAMPLE): 100 200 500]	3008553	

## Collocation

Based on British National Corpus (BNC) The main emphasis of this study is the exploration of the similarities and differences of the collocations of the two synonymous words “say” and “tell”. As Rahman (2021) states that collocations errors are often made by Indonesian EFL learners and the errors seems acceptable since the meaning of collocation can still be rendered by the readers to a certain degree. Seeing as there is a large number of data to be analyzed, the researcher took 10 highest collocation based on the frequency and the context displayed in BNC. They are:

### a. SAY

It can be seen from the data of BNC, the word “say” has high collocation to ‘Anything’ (1286 of 27172), ‘Na’ (713 of 15611); ‘Gon’ (678 of 12415). ‘Needless’ (415 of ), ‘Dare’ (373 of 2014), ‘Hello’ (292 of 3664), ‘Goodbye’ (278 of 1376), ‘Experts’ (154 of 3119), ‘Suffice’ (148 of 520), ‘Honestly’ (100 of 1369).

**Table 6. Collocation of the word “say”**

ON CLICK:	CONTEXT	TRANSLATE (PT)	GOOGLE	IMAGE	PRONVIDEO	BOOK	HELP
HELP	CONTEXT	FREQ	ALL	%	MI		
1	ANYTHING	1287	27172	4.74	3.10		
2	NA	714	15811	4.57	3.05		
3	GON	678	12415	5.46	3.30		
4	NEEDLESS	415	540	76.85	7.12		
5	DARE	373	2014	18.52	5.07		
6	HELLO	292	3664	7.97	3.85		
7	GOODBYE	278	1376	20.20	5.19		
8	EXPOS	154	3119	4.94	3.16		
9	SURFICE	148	520	28.46	5.69		
10	HONESTLY	100	1369	7.30	3.72		
11	PRAYERS	61	978	6.34	3.50		
12	EXAGGERATION	52	322	16.15	4.87		
13	GOODNIGHT	51	728	7.01	3.66		
14	CAMPAIGNERS	48	449	10.69	4.27		
15	ORGANISERS	47	1052	4.47	3.01		
16	DETECTIVES	44	898	4.90	3.15		
17	FAREWELL	31	684	4.53	3.03		

**b. TELL**

It can be seen from the data of BNC, the word “tell” has high collocation to “You” (13407 of 661498 ); ‘Me’ (6032 of 127872), ‘Us’ (2075 of 74234), ‘LL’ (1936 of 68755), ‘Story’ (592 of 13061), ‘Truth’ (584 of 7865), ‘Please’ (280 of 13634), ‘Anyone’ (275 of 143039), ‘Stories’ (190 of 4554), ‘Tale’ (133 of 2031)

**Table 7. Collocation of the word “tell”**

ON CLICK:	CONTEXT	TRANSLATE (PT)	GOOGLE	IMAGE	PRONVIDEO	BOOK	HELP
HELP	CONTEXT	FREQ	ALL	%	MI		
1	YOU	13407	661498	2.03	3.09		
2	ME	6032	127872	4.72	4.31		
3	US	2075	74234	2.80	3.55		
4	LL	1936	68755	2.82	3.56		
5	STORY	592	13061	4.53	4.25		
6	TRUTH	584	7865	7.43	4.96		
7	PLEASE	280	13634	2.05	3.11		
8	ANYONE	275	143039	1.96	3.04		
9	STORIES	190	4554	4.17	4.13		
10	TALE	133	2031	6.55	4.78		
11	LIES	106	5120	2.07	3.12		
12	ANYBODY	99	4711	2.10	3.14		
13	TALES	69	1211	5.70	4.58		
14	HER	53	1376	3.85	4.02		
15	MIL	49	2319	2.11	3.15		
16	IM	48	1940	2.46	3.37		
17	DARE	46	2014	2.28	3.26		

**Context**

The data on the ‘chart’ of BNC shows that the word “say” with the frequency 66548. It is found in the context of Spoken (22052), Fiction (15429), Magazine (3316), Newspaper (6701), Non Academic (5095), Academic (5456), and Misc (8499). In can be concluded that the words “say” is frequently appeared in the “spoken activities” and “Fiction context”

like conversations, dialogues, and other oral activities.

**Table 8. The word “say” common found in context**

British National Corpus (BNC)	SEARCH	CHART	CONTEXT	OVERVIEW
CHANGE TO HORIZONTAL CHART				
SECTION (CLICK FOR SUB-SECTIONS) (SEE ALL SECTIONS AT ONCE)	FREQ	SIZE (M)	PER MIL	CLICK FOR CONTEXT (SEE ALL)
SPOKEN	22,052	10.0	2,213.24	
FICTION	15,429	15.9	969.81	
MAGAZINE	3,316	7.3	456.62	
NEWSPAPER	6,701	10.5	640.24	
NON-ACAD	5,095	16.5	308.88	
ACADEMIC	5,456	15.3	355.86	
MISC	8,499	20.8	407.92	
TOTAL	66,548			SEE ALL TOKENS

In the similar findings, the word “tell” with the frequency 28662. It can be found in the context of Spoken (6909), Fiction (12979), Magazine (1272), Newspaper (1426), Non Academic (1674), Academic (1039) and Misch (3366). It infers that the word “tell” is frequently appeared in the “Fiction context” and “Spoken Activities”.

**Table 9. The word “tell” common found in the context**

British National Corpus (BNC)	SEARCH	CHART	CONTEXT	OVERVIEW
CHANGE TO HORIZONTAL CHART				
SECTION (CLICK FOR SUB-SECTIONS) (SEE ALL SECTIONS AT ONCE)	FREQ	SIZE (M)	PER MIL	CLICK FOR CONTEXT (SEE ALL)
SPOKEN	6,909	10.0	693.42	
FICTION	12,979	15.9	815.62	
MAGAZINE	1,272	7.3	175.16	
NEWSPAPER	1,426	10.5	136.25	
NON-ACAD	1,674	16.5	101.48	
ACADEMIC	1,039	15.3	67.77	
MISC	3,366	20.8	161.55	
TOTAL	28,662			SEE ALL TOKENS

**CONCLUSION**

Based on the findings discussed above, it can be concluded that the words “say” and “tell” are synonymous in meanings. The similarity is that both words have similar meanings and the concordance one. The similarity also seen in the findings of context.

The word “say” is commonly found in the spoken activities context and fiction context. In the same context but different rate position, the word “tell” is commonly found in the fiction context and spoken activities.. The differences are found in the collocation and the frequency rate position.

This research is very limited in terms of scope and analysis. It briefly discusses similarities and differences of synonymous words “say” and “tell”. This study focuses in discussing frequency, concordance, collocations and the context commonly found. Hopefully this finding of the research may open the view about using synonymous words appropriately and this study also becomes reference for the next researcher who want to do further research like using some available big corpora.

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