REPORT SPEECH IN A MORE IMMEDIATE WAY

About the language

Reporting speech normally involves a process of changing tenses, pronouns and time and place words. In this unit, we focus instead on a simpler way – and a special use of the past continuous.

1 Using direct speech

In conversation, we often want to tell friends about the things we or other people have said. If Holly says to Dave on a Saturday night: ‘I’m tired. I’ve had enough of this party,’ he can tell a friend about it on Sunday, using the grammar of reported speech:

Then Holly said she was tired and that she’d had enough of the party.

But he doesn’t have to. It’s easier and more natural in an informal context just to use Holly’s actual words (direct speech):

Then Holly said, ‘I’m tired. I’ve had enough of this party.’

The only problem when we do this is that it’s not always clear when our words end, and the direct speech begins. To solve this we sometimes use ‘marker’ words. These words, which may or may not have been used by the original speaker, act as speech marks.

Listen to the dialogue between work colleagues, and try to identify the three marker words that the speaker uses. Notice the stress they place on these words. Check your answers on page 61.

Elsa: I finally managed to get through to Tim on the phone today.
Jacob: Good. How did it go?
Elsa: Not very well. I started by saying to him, ‘Look, if we don’t find a way of working together, we’ll never get the product launch ready in time.’ And he said, ‘Oh, I didn’t know we had a problem.’ So I said, ‘Well, you haven’t replied to any of my last three e-mails.’
Jacob: And how did he respond?
Elsa: He just told me to relax!

2 Seven marker words

The seven marker words that we sometimes use are: but, hey, listen, oh, okay, and well. As well as indicating when the direct speech begins, the one we choose can add drama to the report by revealing the attitude of the person who was speaking.

But, listen and look often introduce a different point of view:

… and then Tom said to Sue, ‘Listen, I’m not your servant, you know.’
She said to me, ‘But you can’t go out dressed like that!’

Hey and oh sometimes express surprise:

1 Jane started to walk towards the door so Mark said, ‘Hey, where are you going?’
2 The shop assistant said it was only £10 and I said, ‘Oh, are you sure?’

Okay and well may suggest the speaker is hesitant or doubtful:

… and I said, ‘Okay, you can have a shower, but we’re going to be late again.’
I didn’t want to take my coat, but Bob said, ‘Well, it can be cold in Scotland.’

Practice: Exercises 1–3 pages 62–63.

3 Telling jokes and stories

When we tell a joke or a story, it’s normal to use a ‘direct’ way of reporting speech.

Read this joke, and as you do so, try to find one other typical grammatical feature of storytelling. Then check your answers below.

Two men are going for a walk, when they see the fastest man-eating lion in the world in the distance. The first man takes a pair of running shoes out of his bag, and begins to put them on. The second man says to him, ‘Hey, why are you doing that? You can’t run faster than the world’s fastest man-eating lion.’ But the first man says, ‘Listen, I only have to run faster than you’.

Practice: Exercise 4 on page 63.

4 Using said, say(s), go(es) and went

In the examples so far in this unit, we’ve introduced speech with the past verb form said. But it is also possible, but only in very informal contexts to use the present tense says, or a past or present form of go.

1 Then after class yesterday, Becky says to me ‘What are doing tonight?’ and I go, ‘I’m revising’; and she says, ‘You’re always working, you. Why don’t you take a break?’
2 Dave shouted at me again this morning, so I went to me ‘Look, why are you in such a bad mood these and he said, ‘Sorry, I’m a bit stressed out about the exams next week.’

Young people in the UK, and people in TV dramas or soap operas, often use be like, but this is considered extremely informal, or incorrect by many people:

So then we had a bit of a row. Steve is like, ‘You should have tested me if you weren’t coming,’ and I’m like, ‘I told you already I’d forgotten to charge my mobile.’

5 Using the past continuous

We sometimes use talk about and tell (someone) about in the past continuous to introduce reports of recent conversations. Look at these examples:

1 Meg was telling me about her new dog yesterday. He’s called Bruno and he’s massive!
2 Ravi was talking about that new film with Johnny Depp. He says it’s pretty good.
3 Anyway, I was telling Chris about my trip to Columbia, and he said he was planning to go there in the summer.

Practice: Exercise 5 page 63.

Answers

1 look, oh, well.
2 It’s also common in storytelling to use the present tense for dramatic effect.
So I said, ‘I don’t want to miss the start? But don’t always stress!’

**Practice**

1a Lizzie and Sanjeet are complaining about their flatmates. Put the dialogue in the correct order.

a Lizzie: That’s typical of Mel. She’s so rude and arrogant. She never lifts a finger and neither does Sophie. And she’s been helping herself to my CDs.

b Sanjeet: And what did she reply?

c Lizzie: No, she’s done it before. So I said to her, ‘Look, just ask next time, will you?’

d Sanjeet: I said to Mel, ‘Look, why don’t you ever do any washing up?’ and she said ‘Listen, I’m hardly ever here. Why should I?’

e Lizzie: She just said, ‘Oh, I didn’t think you’d mind.’ Honestly, it drives you mad! I can’t wait till we find a new flat.

f Sanjeet: She hasn’t, has she? Is it the first time?

1b Listen to check your answers. Then listen and repeat, paying attention to stress.

2 Kate is talking to a friend on the phone. Complete what she says with the actual words she used a–e.

So I phoned John and said, ‘What time do you think you can meet?’ And he said, ‘Oh, I’ll be there by 6.30.’ I said, ‘Great, thanks.’

3a Put the words in brackets in the correct order to complete these sentences.

1 I said, (up? / hurry / Look, / you / will?) ‘_________ I don’t want to miss the start of the film.’

2 So I said, (keep / will you? / shouting, / don’t / Listen?) ‘_________ I don’t want the whole street to hear us arguing.’

3 Hilary said, (you can / than 20kg. / Well, I / carry more / don’t think) ‘Well actually it is – I’m not in the mood now.

4 I said, (more sweets. / have some / Okay, / you can) ‘_________ But don’t blame me if you’re sick.’

5 So I said, (you / what / are / here? / doing / Hey, Hey) ‘_________? You should be at school!’

6 And then I said, (don’t think / the right change / given me / you’ve / Oh, I) ‘_________ I gave you a ten pound note.’

3b Match the sentences 1–6 above with the responses a–f.

a So did he stop eating then?

b Did you get there on time in the end?

c So did you manage to have a proper conversation after that?

d Did and did he have a good excuse for being out of school?

e Hmm, I think she’s right about the 20kg limit.

f So did you get the right change in the end?

4 Put the words in brackets in the correct place to complete the joke.

A bank robber goes to prison for stealing, but he

refuses to tell the police where he’s hidden the money. His wife telephones him in prison and, ‘Darling, I need to plant the potatoes now. I suppose I’ll have to do the garden myself this year.’ The robber replies, ‘Don’t touch the garden! That’s where I buried the money!’

They didn’t seem happy. The robber for a minute or two, ‘laughs’

A week later he’s having his lunch and he another phone call ‘gets’

from his wife, saying, ‘You won’t believe this, but yesterday seven policemen came to the house and dug up the garden!’

And then says to his wife, ‘Now plant the potatoes!’ ‘Okay.’

5 Complete the dialogues with the words in the box.

You’ve / Listen / says / talking / telling / saying / having

Kay: I was ______ a chat with Sal this morning. She was ______ me about her new flat. It sounds really nice. Really spacious. What about you? Have you had a good day?

Joe: Actually, no. I had a horrible lunch date with that guy, Phil. He just kept staring at me, and then he said, ‘_________ got really beautiful eyes, Jo.’ ‘That’s a bit strange, isn’t it? So I just said, ‘Oh, thank you!’ Anyway, after that it got worse, because when the bill came he said, ‘_________ I’m sorry, but I’ve left my wallet at home’ – and he’d promised to pay!

Sean: Dan was ______ about that bomb scare at the station.

Kieran: Really? What was he ______?

Sean: Well, apparently, a man’s voice came over the loudspeaker and just ______. ‘This is an emergency, please leave the station immediately.’

**Extension**

Choose some of the topics below, and write them down using reported speech. Then record your piece. Make the intonation as dramatic as possible.

1 Report a real conversation you had yesterday.

2 Tell a joke.

3 Describe a complaint you made in a restaurant.

4 Describe an argument you had with an old friend or family member.

5 Describe a bad experience in a shop.

6 Describe a conversation that shocked or amazed you.