

A Critique of Studies Discussing the Difference between *Do It* and *Do So* Using Such Keywords as 'Same', 'Same Type/Kind' and 'Specific'

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Abstract

This paper examines what three well-known English grammar books write as to the difference in meaning between *do it* and *do so*. Those books attempt to explain the selection conditions of the two pro-forms using keywords such as 'same', 'same type', 'same kind' and 'specific'. According to the grammarians, *do it* tends to denote the same action or event as the antecedent, whereas *do so* tends to denote the same kind/type of action or event. However, such an explanation would possibly confuse non-native speakers of English when they want to tell the difference between the two pro-forms, because the distinction 'same' and 'same type/kind' is related in a rather complex way to linguistic contexts in which *do it* and *do so* are used or to how the speaker views the fact described with the use of the two pro-forms.

Keywords

do it, *do so*, same, same type/kind, specific

1. Introductory remarks

The English pro-forms *do it* and *do so* are both used to avoid repeating a verb and its object or complement, as exemplified in the following.

(1) I promised to get the tickets, and I will **do so/it** as soon as possible.¹

Although there are many publications dealing with the distinction between the two pro-

¹ Example (1) has been taken from Swan (2016, Entry 29.2). Bold occurs in the original quot.

forms from a number of perspectives,² this paper will focus on those which have discussed the selection conditions of the pro-forms in terms of the following notions: the same action v. the same general type of action (Quirk et al. 1985); a specific action at a specific time v. a similar action at a different time and/or place (Declerck 1991); the same event v. the same kind of event (Huddleston & Pullum 2002).

The present paper, using native English speakers' acceptability judgements,³ will give a careful inspection into the above-mentioned points of view the three books have used, and point out that the grammarians above may not have succeeded in accounting for their examples which illustrate the differences in meaning between *do it* and *do so*. The following three sections will look at the ways in which each of the researchers examines the usage of *do it* and *do so*, and point out the issues caused by those descriptions.

2. Quirk et al. (1985): the same action v. the same general type of action

Quirk et al. (1985: 877) write that a subtle difference is highlighted between the *do it* and the *do so* constructions in the following examples.

(2) Martin is painting his house. I'm told he does it every four years.

(3) Martin is painting his house. I'm told this merely because his neighbour did so last year.

The authors, admitting that *do it* and *do so* could be interchanged in (2) and (3), have commented that *do it* is favoured in (2) as the same action (the painting of Martin's house) is being described on both occasions, whereas *do so* is favoured in (3) because it is

2 For example, Swan (2016, Entry 29.2) states that *do so* is mainly used to refer to the same action with the same subject. His example is: I haven't got time to get the ticket. Who's going to **do it**? (NOT ... Who's going to do so?)

3 In this paper, a 'native speaker of English' is defined as 'a person who acquired the English language from his or her earliest childhood, and who has been able to speak it fluently as his or her first language'. The people who participated in this study as informants were all true of this definition. They consisted of four language school teachers. Two were from the USA, one from Australia and one from New Zealand. Their ages ranged from 30s to 40s. They all agreed that their comments would be incorporated into the present paper.

the same general *type*⁴ of action (painting of houses) that is being described.

However, the sentences in (2) and (3) are insufficient to demonstrate the semantic difference between the two pro-forms, because the *do it* and *do so* constructions appear in different co-texts: the subject of the pro-form and the tense in each example are different. Therefore, minimal pairs, pairs of minimally different sentences to isolate a specific phenomenon, such as the following need to be used:

- (4) a. Martin is painting his house. I'm told he does it every four years.
- b. Martin is painting his house. I'm told he does so every four years.
- (5) a. Martin is painting his house. I'm told this merely because his neighbour did it last year.
- b. Martin is painting his house. I'm told this merely because his neighbour did so last year.

Four native speakers of English were asked to consider the sentences in (4) and (5), which are altered from (2) and (3) by the present author to be minimally paired. The results are as follows: all the informants judged (4a) and (5b) as acceptable, as Quirk et al. (1985) suggest. Interestingly, however, all of them also regarded (4b) and two of them considered (5a) as acceptable, which is different from what Quirk et al. (1985) claim.

What would these results suggest? Observing (4a-b) and (5a-b) will likely inform us of the possibility that these sentences may have and/or be subject to semantic ambiguity. Examples (4a) and (4b) could have two interpretations: (i) the house Martin is painting now is the one he painted four years ago; (ii) the house Martin painted four years ago may not be the same as the one he is painting now. Examples (5a) and (5b) allow three interpretations: (i) it is his neighbour's own house that this neighbour painted last year; (ii) it is Martin's house that his neighbour painted last year; (iii) it is neither his neighbour's house nor Martin's own house that Martin's neighbour painted last year (i.e., he painted someone else's house last year).

4 The word *type* is originally italicized by Quirk et al.

These confusions might owe to the fact that Quirk et al. (1985) have not made it clear what they mean by the terms *same* and *same general type*. In other words, the authors have let the interpretation of ‘the same action’ and that of ‘the same general type of action’ hinge upon each reader’s own interpretation of the notions. Thus, it does not seem that the authors have provided a testable hypothesis about the use of *do it* and *do so*.

3. Declerck (1991): a specific action at a specific time v. a similar action at a different time

Declerck’s (1991) writes that ‘[*do it*] is only used for specific actions performed by a conscious agent and at some specific time’ (p. 194), as illustrated in the following three examples:

(6) She decorated the church. I think the vicar asked to do it.

(7) Unfortunately, I can’t play the trumpet. If I had been able to do so/*it, I could have joined your band.

(8) Why do human beings destroy so much? — They do so/*it because they think only of themselves. (generic sentence) (Declerck 1991: 194)

Although in example (6) *do so* is not originally added as an optional possibility, all my informants regarded *do so* instead of *do it* as acceptable. With respect to (7) and (8), which do not have any elements to imply that the actions of playing the trumpet or destroying something will be performed at any specific time, all the informants’ acceptability judgements are consistent with Declerck’s claim. Note, however, that the sentences in (6) do not include any element to show that the action of decorating the church was done at a specific time. The question then arises: is it possible to use *do it* without any time expression only if the speaker of (6) knows the time when she decorated the church? The answer cannot be found in Declerck (1991).

Declerck further writes, ‘Because *do it* refers to a specific action at a specific time, it is not normally used when the reference is not to the same action but to the same kind of

action (i.e. to similar actions performed at different times and/or places)' (p. 194).

Judging from what he remarks, Declerck (1991) appears to draw a clearer line between 'the same action' and 'the same kind of action' than Quirk et al. (1985). That is to say, the same action denotes a specific action at a specific time, whereas the same kind of action is a similar action performed at a different time and/or place.

In order to support this claim, Declerck gives the following two examples. These examples, unlike example (6), include expressions of time 'every four or five years' and 'last week'.

(9) Esther is painting her gate. She does it every four or five years.

(10) Esther is painting her gate. — That's just because her neighbour did so last week.

(Declerck 1991: 194)

These two examples, which look like examples (2) and (3), need to be converted into minimal pairs, as in (11) and (12), if Declerck wants to verify his claim about the characteristics of *do it*.

(11) a. Esther is painting her gate. She does it every four or five years.

b. Esther is painting her gate. She does so every four or five years.

(12) a. Esther is painting her gate. — That's just because her neighbour did it last week.

b. Esther is painting her gate. — That's just because her neighbour did so last week.

The informants were asked to judge the acceptability of (11) and (12), altered by the present author from (9) and (10), and their judgements are the same as those of (4a-b) and (5 a-b) above: All of them considered (11a) and (12b) as acceptable, as Declerck suggests. However, all also regarded (11b) and two informants considered (11a) as acceptable, which differs from Declerck's claim.

These agreements and disagreements with Declerck's account of the characteristic of

do it might be due to semantic ambiguity which is like that observed in (4) and (5). That is, examples (11a) and (11b) could have two interpretations: (i) the gate Esther is painting now is the one she painted four years ago; (ii) the gate Esther painted four years ago may not be the same as the one she is painting now. Example (12a) and (12b) allow three interpretations: (i) it is her neighbour's own gate that this neighbour painted last week; (ii) it is Esther's gate that her neighbour painted last week; (iii) it is neither her neighbour's gate nor Esther's own gate that Esther's neighbour painted last week (i.e., she painted someone else's gate last week).

Furthermore, the following examples provided by Declerck, in which he claims either *do it* or *do so* is possible, might make his readers confused with his claim about the property of *do it*.

(13) I bought a watch-dog yesterday. — I can guess why you did (so/it).⁵

(Declerck 1991: 194)

(14) I haven't talked to her yet, but I will do it/so tonight.

(Declerck 1991: 196)

(15) You've promised to repair the vacuum cleaner. — I will do it/so as soon as I have time.

(Declerck 1991: 196)

If you abide by Declerck's parameters (the same action denotes a specific action at a specific time, whereas the same kind of action is a similar action performed at a different time and/or place), in (15), the use of *do it* becomes problematic because no timeframe in which to repair the vacuum cleaner is specified and/or mentioned at the time of the utterance. In this way, Declerck's (1991) analysis may engender in his readers the question: what are the temporal and practical parameters of 'specific time'?

By way of an aside, my four informants' intuitions about (13), (14) and (15) are as follows: as for (13), three of the respondents accepted *do it* as well as *do so*, and one of the four informants commented that *do so* is the only acceptable choice. With respect to (14), all the informants agreed that both *do it* and *do so* are both acceptable. As for (15), all the

⁵ The original example includes *that* as an alternative pro-form.

interviewees regarded *do it* as more natural than *do so*.

In addition to the problem with his insufficient explanation of the notion of ‘a specific time’, one more problem with Declerck’s discussion needs to be mentioned here: he has pointed out some restrictions on the use of *do it*, but has not written about whether the use of *do so* has such restrictions or not. That is, Declerck has not drawn a clear distinction between *do it* and *do so*, and this cannot deny the possibility that *do so* always replaces *do it*.

4. Huddleston & Pullum (2002): the same event v. the same kind of event

The difference in meaning between the *do it* and the *do so* constructions is described in Huddleston & Pullum (2002) as follows:

Anaphoric ***do it*** and ***do that*** characteristically denote specific events, either the same event as that denoted by the antecedent VP or at least the same action involving the same participants as those expressed by the internal complements of the antecedent VP. In contrast, ***do so*** VPs often denote merely the same **kind** of event as the antecedent.⁶ (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 1534)

Although this description by Huddleston & Pullum does not seem to draw a clear distinction between the same event, the same action and the same kind of event, their examples, which are given as (16) below, and their remarks following the examples will offer a hint of the distinction between the same event and the same kind of event.

- (16) i. a. Jill nearly caught a fish yesterday. b. Tomorrow she’s sure she will do so.
ii. a. Jill nearly caught that fish yesterday. b. Tomorrow she’s sure she will do it.⁷

(Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 1534)

6 Bold occurs in the original quot.

7 Underlining occurs in the original quot.

Huddleston & Pullum’s explanation of the sentences in (16) is:

In the salient interpretation of [ia] there is no particular fish that I have in mind as one Jill nearly caught, and [ib] is then a more likely continuation than [iib]. **Do so**⁸ is here interpreted as “catch a fish”, with no requirement that it be the same fish as the one she nearly caught yesterday. In [iia] I am referring to a particular fish that I take to be identifiable to you (probably by virtue of previous mention), and here the more likely continuation is [iib]; *do it* is interpreted as “catch that fish”, where it must be the same fish as she nearly caught yesterday. The issue in the sequence [iia] + [iib] is Jill’s ongoing battle with a certain fish, where in the sequence [ia] + [ib] it is the more general situation of catching a fish. (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 1534)

It can be understood from this description that Huddleston & Pullum attempt to claim:

- (17) *Do it* requires that the object NP of the verb *do* be a specific one while *do so* requires the object NP be an unspecific one.
- (18) The same event requires that the sentence subject be the same person and the object be the same entity.

For this claim to be testified, (16i) and (16ii) should be minimally paired; they each will be

- (19) a. Jill nearly caught a fish yesterday. Tomorrow she’s sure she will do so.
b. Jill nearly caught a fish yesterday. Tomorrow she’s sure she will do it.

and

- (20) a. Jill nearly caught that fish yesterday. Tomorrow she’s sure she will do so.
b. Jill nearly caught that fish yesterday. Tomorrow she’s sure she will do it.

8 Bold occurs with the word *Do* in the original quot.

And then it should be demonstrated that (19a) and (19b) are both acceptable and that *do so* in (19a) requires ‘that fish’ in the first sentence be an unspecific fish, and *do it* in (19b) requires ‘that fish’ in the first sentence be a specific fish. Also, it should be verified that (20a) and (20b) are both acceptable and that *do so* in (20a) must imply that Jill is sure she will catch the same kind of fish as that she nearly caught yesterday, and *do it* in (20b) must imply that Jill is sure she will catch the very same individual fish as that she nearly caught yesterday.

Informant reactions, however, are inconsistent with what was written in the preceding paragraph. As for (19a-b), all the respondents (four persons) commented that it is hard to imagine the context where the same person will catch the very same fish in the river or pond next day, and that (19a) and (19b) are both favoured.

As for (20a-b), all respondents said that they would always recognize ‘that fish’ as not a fish of the same species but as the same individual fish, and that there is no semantic difference felt between the two sentences. Judging from these native speakers’ reactions about (19) and (20), the criteria shown in (17) and (18) do not seem to work well.⁹

5. Concluding remarks

This paper has examined the ways Quirk et al. (1985), Declerck (1991) and Huddleston & Pullum (2002) accounted for the selection conditions for the use of the *do it* and *do so* constructions. We can infer that the first authors regarded the same action as the requirement for the use of *do it*. The second author held the view that an agentive subject, a specific action and a specific time were requisite in the *do it* construction. The third authors seem to necessitate the same individual entity as the object of the *this* construction.

9 In order to verify those claims in (17) and (18), the present author thinks that an example such as the following, invented by one of my informants, would be more appropriate.

- (i) a. I nearly bought a car yesterday, but owing to an error I couldn’t. Tomorrow I will do it.
- b. I nearly bought a car yesterday, but owing to an error I couldn’t. Tomorrow I will do so.

All the informants responded that (ia) and (ib) are favoured, and that in both co-texts, the two pro-forms both refer to the action of ‘buy the same individual car I nearly bought yesterday’.

Yet, as has been illustrated in the previous sections, the keywords used by those scholars might give rise to confusion when non-native speakers of English would like to tell the *do it* construction from the *do so* construction, because even for native English speakers, the dividing line between ‘same’ and ‘same type/kind’ is not easy to draw and these notions tend to overlap, and because how these keywords are interpreted would be complicatedly associated with linguistic contexts in which *do it* and *do so* appear or with the way the utterer views the fact described with the use of the two pro-forms.

It might be hasty, however, to strongly say that the three books’ explanations are defective, because they use the expressions ‘a subtle difference’ ‘favoured’ (Quirk et al. 1985: 877), ‘not normally used’ (Declerck 1991: 194) or ‘often denote’ (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 1534) when describing the difference between *do it* and *do so*. Would these expressions mean that some native English speakers make no distinction between the two pro-forms? This is one further point which deserves a great deal of consideration.

Before closing the discussion in this paper, three things seem to be worth mentioning. Firstly, Quirk et al. (1985) and Huddleston & Pullum (2002), dealing with *do it* and *do so* as a substitute form for the transitive verb + NP object construction, seem to have a crucial defect: *do it* and *do so* are not only used to substitute for a transitive verb + object structure but also act as a substitute for a verb phrase consisted of an intransitive verb without a direct object. For instance, observe examples (8) and (14) again, repeated below as (21) and (22).

- (21) Why do human beings destroy so much? — They do so/*it because they think only of themselves. (generic sentence) (Declerck 1991: 194)
- (22) I haven’t talked to her yet, but I will do it/so tonight. (Declerck 1991: 196)

Note that in (21) *do so* only replaces the intransitive verb *destroy*, and that in (22) *do it* or *do so* is used to substitute the combination of the intransitive verb *talk* and the prepositional phrase *to her*. This fact suggests that the analyses of the difference between *do it* and *do so* by Quirk et al. (1985) and Huddleston & Pullum (2002)) have not succeeded in accounting sufficiently for the difference between the two forms.

Secondly, it is interesting to note that some of my informants and several scholars' comments as to the formal nature of *do so*.¹⁰ Among the authors who have appeared in the present study, Declerck (1991: 195) remarks that '*do so* is rather formal ... *Do it* is neutral to the formal/informal contrast'. Hewings (2013) and Swan (2016) also comment that *do so* tends to be used in formal English. Would their comments suggest the difference between *do it* and *do so* tends to be diluted or disappear in formal English? If a speaker chooses to always talk and write in formal style, does he or she normally not use *do it*, and only use *do so* in any linguistic context? To look for the answer to this question, future work will be needed to investigate the frequency of the two pro-forms in different registers.

Lastly, it might be that the acceptability and interpretation of each of the examples offered in this paper vary depending on where the native speaker is from. What was discussed in this paper partly depends on rather a small number of native speakers' linguistic intuition. Thus, it would be needed to consult a larger number of people who speak different regional varieties of English about the difference between the two pro-forms.

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10 Two informants commented that the *do so* versions sound formal in (4b), (5b), (6), (11b), (12b), (13), (14), (15), (19a), (20a) and (ib) in footnote 9.