REGISTER

What is Register?

Narrow definition: Register is an occupational variety of language. (Also perceived as jargon)

For example, teachers, computer programmers, mechanics, surgeons, airline pilots, bank managers, sales clerks, jazz fans, and sociolinguists tend to have characteristic ways of speaking which involve certain particular word choices and grammatical constructions or in other words they employ different registers.

- Most people associate register with particular word choices.
- However, the syntactic ordering and patterns of larger-scale linguistic organization are also important.

Broad definition: It is a kind of social genre of linguistic usage (sometimes specified as a sociolect to differentiate it from ‘dialect’).

Examples of registers under this definition would include the language of a newspaper article, the language of a conversation about the weather, academic prose, a recipe in a cookery book, and so on.

Register vs. Dialect:

- Dialect is a variety of language defined largely by it’s users’ regional or socio-economic origins.
- Register is a variety of language that results of differences in the social situation of use.
- These variations appears in the lexicogrammar (i.e. word choices + syntactic ordering)
One of the recent findings of **corpus linguistics** is that there is far more variation as a result of register than as a result of dialect.

By analogy with ‘dialect’, register is referred to as **diatyp**

**Diatype vs. Dialect**

According to Gregory (1967), language variation can be divided into two categories:

- *Dialect* for variation according to *user* (e.g. African American Vernacular English)
- *Diatype* for variation according to *use* (e.g. the specialized language of an academic journal).

Three variables of *dialect* are:

- **Geographical**: Where the speech community is based.
- **Social**: What social group/s the speech community belong to.
- **Temporal**: In what time (present or historical) the speech community exists.

**Diatype** is usually analyzed in terms of:

- **Field**: The subject matter or setting.
- **Tenor**: The participants and their relationships.
- **Mode**: The channel of communication, such as spoken, written or signed

- Ferguson (1994, cited in Wardhaugh, 2006, p. 52) argues that “People participating in recurrent communication situations tend to develop similar vocabularies, similar features of intonation, and characteristic bits of syntax and phonology that they use in these situations.”

- Ferguson (1994, cited in Wardhaugh, 2006, p. 52) also adds that such special terms seem to facilitate speedy communication, establish feelings of rapport, and serve other purposes similar to the accommodation that influences dialect formation.

- One person may control a variety of registers. **Example**: You can be a stockbroker and an archeologist, or a mountain climber and an economist. Each register helps you to express your identity at a specific time or place, i.e., how you seek to present yourself to others.

It is important that register is defined primarily by the circumstance and purpose of the communicative situation, rather than by the individual user or ethnic/social group using the variety.

Therefore, the definition must be a non-linguistic one, against which particular linguistic features can then be set.
Halliday (1964) identifies three variables that determine register:

- **Field:** the subject matter of the discourse
- **Tenor:** the participants and their relationships
- **Mode:** the channel of communication (e.g. spoken or written).

**Field**

- It refers to the social setting and purpose of the interaction.
- **Example:** in the case of an academic article in a professional journal, the field would be the subject matter of the article, and the purpose in publishing it would be to spread the argument and ideas among academic colleagues.

**Tenor**

- It refers to the relationship between the participants in the event.
- **Example:** the writer of the article + readers including academic colleagues and students constitute the tenor here.

**Mode:**

- It refers to the medium of communication (e.g. spoken, written, or e-mailed).
- **Example:** an academic article is in the written mode.
- Changing this last dimension to the spoken mode would alter the register from an ‘article’ to a ‘lecture’, and there would be corresponding and predictable differences in the lexicogrammar:
  - the sentences would be shorter and contain fewer embedded clauses in speech;
  - the word choice is likely to be slightly less formal and perhaps less technical;
  - there might be more direct interaction with the audience and direct address in the form of ‘I’ and ‘you’; and so on.

Clearly there are further details and sub-types within each set of the three dimensions.

- The context of use is the crucial determinant in identifying register.
- In this way slight differences in linguistic style can be ascribed to close differences in social function.
Example:

A recipe basically has the register dimensions of:

- (field) cookery
- (tenor) professional cook to amateur cook
- (mode) written, as a table of ingredients followed by the method.

However, different recipes have different registers:

- A complex cookery cake reference book may assume a very knowledgeable reader (a difference in the tenor)
- A cookery book with sumptuous photographs and mouth-watering lyrical prose which is clearly intended as a 'coffee table' book for reading rather than cooking anything practical. (a difference in the field)
- Spoken instructions on how to make Mahalabiah telephoned to me by my mother. (a difference in the mode)

All these differences produced a very different set of linguistic patterns.

- Finally, all these register distinctions have to be matched to cultural expectations.

Example 1:

A discussion about the weather in Britain contains a very different lexicogrammatical structure from a discussion about the weather in Saudi Arabia (as well as the content conveyed).

Example 2:

Stockwell (2002) gave the following example: “I have a recipe from the Raffle Hotel in Singapore which is clearly intended as a particular cookery manual, but since in Nottingham I cannot get ingredients like green pandan leaves, I read its register as an exotic fiction rather than a cookery book.”

- The manual was intended for hotel residents. Stockwell was one of the hotel residents but now he is someone who lives in Nottingham (a change in the tenor)
- Stockwell read the manual not as a manual to order but as an exotic fiction to enjoy (the purpose of the discourse changed, i.e. a change in the field)
Style

What is style?

Style refers to variations within registers that can represent individual choices along social dimensions.

- One stylistic dimension within a register would be the scale of **formality-casualness**.
  - Formally said: ‘Place the ingredients into a prepared dish’.
  - Casually said: ‘Put the mix into the bowl you've got ready’.

The field, tenor and mode of both these utterances could be the same. However, the style is different.

- Generally, the written mode tends to be more formal than the spoken mode.
- With e-mail, a new sort of discourse that is not so much a midway blend of the two as a bundle of features all of its own.

According to Wardhaugh (2006),

- Speakers can adopt different styles of speaking.
- You can speak very formally or very informally, your choice being governed by circumstances. For example,:
  - ceremonial occasions almost invariably requires very formal speech,
  - public lectures somewhat less formal,
  - casual conversation quite informal,
  - and conversations between intimates on matters of less important may be extremely informal and casual.

- We may try to relate the level of formality chosen to a variety of factors:
  - the kind of occasion;
  - the various social, age, and other differences that exist between the participants;
  - the particular task that is involved (e.g. writing or speaking);
  - the emotional involvement of one or more of the participants; and so on.

- We appreciate that such distinction exist when we recognize:
  - the stylistic appropriateness of *What do you intend to do, your majesty?*
  - and the inappropriateness of *Waddy intend doin’, Rex?*
According to Stockwell (2002), most styles are best thought of as *scales* or *clines* since people are very skillful at matching their style as appropriate to the social setting.

Stylistic scales with many relative gradations in between can include:

- formal-casual
- impersonal-intimate
- monologic-dialogic
- formulaic-creative

In one prominent model, Joos (1961) describes five styles in spoken English:

- **Frozen**: Printed unchanging language such as bible quotations; often contains archaisms.
- **Formal**: One-way participation, no interruption. Technical vocabulary; “Fussy semantics” or exact definitions are important. Includes introductions between strangers.
- **Consultative**: Two-way participation. Background information is provided — prior knowledge is not assumed. "Backchannel behaviour" such as "uh huh", "I see", etc. is common. Interruptions allowed.
- **Casual**: In-group friends and acquaintances. No background information provided. Ellipsis and slang common. Interruptions common.
- **Intimate**: Non-public. Intonation more important than wording or grammar. Private vocabulary.

With both registers and styles, most people have a greater passive **competence** than active competence. In other words, they can *understand* a great many more variations than they usually *perform*.

If people are put in unfamiliar social situations, they will often become highly self-conscious and misjudge the pattern they should produce.

Such ‘errors’ are an important feature of sociolinguistic behaviour.
**Euphemism:**

- **Euphemism** is the substitution of an agreeable or less offensive expression in place of one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant to the listener. (Webster's Online Dictionary)

- **Idioms** often rely for their meanings on metaphorical interpretations. (e.g. ‘Kick the bucket’ has a metaphorical meaning of ‘to die’)

- Euphemism can be seen as a lexical replacement by a closely associated word (a **metonymy** rather than a **metaphor**)

**Metonymy vs. Metaphor**

Both figures involve the substitution of one term for another.

- In **metaphor**, this substitution is based on similarity.
  
  **Example:** *The ship plowed through the sea* (using plowed instead of navigated).

- In **metonymy**, the substitution is based on contiguity.
  
  **Example:** *The sails crossed the ocean* (using sails instead of ship with sails).

- Euphemisms for taboo areas (sex, death, war, defecation, and all manner of social unpleasantnesses) are a useful area for mapping social relationships and attitudes.

**Section B: Undergraduate Study** (Stockwell, 2002, pp. 30-32)

**Vicky Oliver’s Study (Euphemism and Death)**

- Vicky Oliver examined ways of presenting death in 100 obituaries from *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* on the same day.

- She noted that *Roget's Thesaurus* lists 115 terms for the verb ‘to die’, and a further 65 noun phrases for the word ‘dead’.

- Not surprisingly, the newspaper obituaries only used a tiny proportion of these (excluding, for example, ‘croaked’, ‘snuffed it’, ‘bit the dust’ and so on).

- The main linguistic strategy was euphemism – ‘the saying of something innocuous that either hints at, or establishes a precondition of some previous offensive intended act’ (Ortony, 1993, cited in Stockwell, 2002, p. 30).
Otherwise, the only conceptual metaphors used were:

- the notion that ‘Life is a battle’ (in the case of illness), as in:
  - the baby who ‘bravely fought but sadly lost her battle’
  - the cancer patient who ‘died suddenly after a courageous fight’

- the notion that ‘Life is a game of cricket’ (in the case of old people), as in:
  - old people who have ‘had a good innings’

What was immediately noticeable in this small corpus of data was that the word for death was often omitted entirely (omission is itself a form of euphemism).

Only 25 of the 100 obituaries used the word ‘died’ at all, and of these, 12 were qualified by the adverbs ‘peacefully’ or ‘quietly’.

In fact, many obituaries simply began with the adverb, omitting the verbal element: ‘Mitchell, Eric James, peacefully at Bognor War Memorial hospital’.

These elliptical forms are not simply the result of space saving in newspapers; the ‘Forthcoming marriages’ section nearby often begins, ‘The engagement is announced between …’. Vicki points out that it would be unthinkable to begin an obituary, ‘The death is announced of …’.

The standard form then, is: ‘Name > adverb > prepositional phrase denoting location > details of funeral service time and place’.

Variations on the adverb include:

- ‘joined Arthur after a long illness’
- ‘reunited with Vic’

Deviations from this pattern are thus foregrounded: only one obituary used the word ‘killed’, in relation to a 19-year-old student who ‘died tragically after a fall at university’.

Vicki discusses her data using work done by Paul Chilton (1986) in which he identifies in the ideological field a point similar to the notion of a face threatening act.

Chilton (1986) calls such moments when the dominant ideology is potentially transparent, a critical discourse moment (CDM).

Taking about death is a CDM, a taboo area that needs to be linguistically negotiated.

Vicky argues that euphemism is a form of verbal avoidance designed to preserve negative face, or the reader’s right to be ideologically unperturbed.
Chilton (1986) defines two ‘functional poles of ideological discourse’, as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Twin poles of ideological discourse:</th>
<th>metaphor</th>
<th>euphemism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Methods:</td>
<td>coercive</td>
<td>suppressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>legitimising</td>
<td>dissimulating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typical linguistic strategies:</td>
<td>replacement</td>
<td>omission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>framing</td>
<td>passivisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>modalisation</td>
<td>nominalisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>narrative ...</td>
<td>lexical replacement ...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Stockwell, 2002, p. 31

In these ways, ideologically problematic areas can be negotiated and fitted into the speaker's (or, more typically, the writer's) worldview.

Chilton analyses the discourses of war and the nuclear arms race (‘nukespeak’) in order to illustrate how governments use:

- metaphor to coerce people into thinking in a particular way
- and euphemism to avoid facing up to the harsh realities of war.

Vicky’s findings:

- Vicki study notices that euphemism as opposed to metaphor is the preferred approach, because the intent is to repress rather than broaden the meaning.

- The result is a prototypical form of discourse (a naturalised register for announcing deaths in newspapers) that is designed to comfort rather than confront social concepts of death.

- She asserts that the obituaries simultaneously evade its reality, respect its significance, and conform to an accepted but implicit social format.
Important Issues to Look for When Reading an Academic Paper

- Is it a journal article or is it a book article?
- What kind of data is the researcher using?
- What kind of methodology did the researcher(s) use?
- What are the most important findings of the study?
- What do you think the weaknesses & strengths of the study are?

It is always wise to read the summary/conclusion of a paper because they summarize the main findings of the paper. They can also briefly point out the weaknesses or the strengths of the paper, and they can suggest future research within a particular area.