

PAPER 8

What is register? How will you classify registers?

The name given to a variety of a language distinguished according to use is register. The category of register is needed when we want to account for what people do with their language. When we observe language activity in the various contexts in which it takes place, we find differences in the types of situation. Indeed language varies as its function varies; it differs in different situations.

It is not the event or state of affairs being talked about that determines the choice, but the convention that a certain kind of language is appropriate to a certain use.

Registers differ primarily in form. Some registers, it is true, have distinctive features at other levels, such as the voice quality associated with the register of church services. But the crucial criteria of any given register are to be found in its grammar and its lexis. Probably lexical features are the most obvious. Some lexical items suffice almost by themselves to identify a certain register: 'cleanses' puts us in the language of advertising, 'probe' of newspapers, especially headlines, 'tablespoonful' of recipes or prescriptions, 'neckline' of fashion reporting or dress-making instructions. The clearest signals of a particular register are scientific technical terms, except those that belong to more than one science, like 'morphology' in biology and linguistics.

Often it is not the lexical item alone but the collocation of two or more lexical items that is specific to one register 'kick' is presumably neutral, but 'free-kick' is from the language of 'football'.

Purely grammatical distinctions between the different registers are less striking, yet there can be considerable variation in grammar also. Extreme cases are newspaper headlines and church services, but many other registers, such as sports commentaries and popular songs, exhibit specific grammatical characteristics. Sometimes, for example, in the language of advertising, it is the combination of grammatical and lexical features that is distinctive. "Pioneer in self drive car hire" is an instance of a fairly restricted grammatical structure.

Registers are not marginal or specific varieties of language. Between them they cover the total range of our language activity. It is only the reference to the various situations, and situation types, in which language is used that we can understand its functioning and its effectiveness. Language is not realized in the abstract: it is realized as the activity of people in situations, as linguistic events which are manifested in a particular dialect and register.

No one suggests, of course, that the various registers characteristic of different types of situation have nothing in common. On the contrary, a great deal of grammatical and lexical material is common to many of the registers of a given language, and some perhaps to all. If this was not so we could not speak of a language in this sense at all, just as we should not be able to speak of a language in the sense of a dialect continuum if there was not a great deal in common among the different dialects.

But there tends to be more difference between events in different registers than between different events in one register. If we failed to note these differences of register, we should be ignoring an important aspect of the nature and functioning of language. Then our descriptions of languages would be inaccurate and our attempts to teach them to foreigners made vastly more difficult.

It is by their formal properties that registers are defined. If two samples of language activity from what, on non-linguistic grounds, could be considered, different situation-types show no differences in grammar or lexis, they are assigned to one and the same register: for the purposes of the description of the language there is only one situation here, not two.

Registers may be distinguished according to field of discourse, mode of discourse and style of discourse.

FIELD OF DISCOURSE: Field of discourse refers to what is going on: to the area of the operation of language activity. Under this heading registers are classified according to the nature of the whole event of which the language activity forms a part. In the type of situation in which the language activity accounts for practically the whole of the relevant activity, such as an essay, a discussion or an academic seminar; the field of discourse is the subject matter. On this dimension of classification, we can recognize registers such as politics and personal relations, and technical registers like biology and mathematics.

There are, on the other hand, situations in which the language activity rarely plays more than a minor part; here the field of discourse refers to the whole event. In this sense there is, for example, a register of domestic chores: 'hovering the carpets' may involve language activity which though marginal, is contributing to the total event.

Registers, classified according to field of discourse thus include both the technical and the non-technical: shopping and games playing as well as medicine and linguistics.

MODE OF DISCOURSE: This refers to the medium or mode of the language activity, and it is this that determines, or rather correlates with, the role played by the language activity in the situation. The primary distinction on this dimension is that into spoken and written language, the two, having by and large, different situational roles. In this connection, reading aloud is a special case of written rather than of spoken language.

The extent of formal differentiation between spoken and written language has varied very greatly among different languages communities and at different periods. But spoken and written English are by no means formally identical. They differ both in grammar and in lexis.

Within these primary modes, and cutting across them to a certain extent, we can recognize further registers such as the language of newspaper, of advertising, of conversation and of sports commentary. Like other dimensions of variations in linguistics, both descriptive and institutional, the classification of modes of discourse is variable in delicacy. We may first identify the language of literature as a single register, but at the next step we would separate the various genres, such as prose fiction and light verse, as distinct registers within it. What is first recognized as the register of journalism is then sub classified into reportage, editorial comment, feature writing and so on.

Some modes of discourse are such that tends to be self-sufficient, in the sense that it accounts for most or all the activity relevant to the situation. In literature particularly the language activity is as it were self-sufficient. The grammatical and lexical distinctions between the various modes of discourse can often be related to the variable situational role assigned to language by the medium.

STYLE OF DISCOURSE: This refers to the relation among the participants. To the extent that these affect and determine features of the language, they suggest a primary distinction into colloquial and polite. This dimension is unlikely ever to yield clearly defined, discrete registers. It is best treated as a clove, and various more delicate cuts

have been suggested, with categories such as 'casual', 'intimate' and 'deferential'. But until we know how language vary with style, such categories are arbitrary and provisional.

The participants relations that determine the style of discourse range through varying degrees of permanence. Most temporary are those which are a feature of the immediate situations, as when the participants are at a party or have met on the train. At the opposite extreme are relations such as that between parents and children. Various socially defined relations, as between teacher and pupil or labor and management, lie somewhere intermediately. Some such registers may show more specific formal properties than others: it is easier to identify on linguistic evidence a situation in which one participant is serving the others in a shop than one involving lecturer and students in a university classroom.

Which participant relations are linguistically relevant, and how far these are distinctively reflected in the grammar and lexis, depends on the language concerned.

It is as the product of these three dimensions of classification that we can best define and identify register.