Language Teaching Texts: A Manual for Teachers

H. G. Widdowson

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Language Registers

Language varies as its function varies; it differs in different situations. The name given to a variety of language distinguished according to its 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 type of language selected as appropriate to different types of situation. There is no need to labour the point that a sports commentary, a church service and a school lesson are linguistically quite distinct. One sentence from any of these and many more situation types would enable us to identify it correctly. We know, for example, where 'an early announcement is expected' comes from, and 'apologies for absence were received'; these are not simply free variants of 'we ought to hear soon' and 'was sorry he couldn't make it'.

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. We should be surprised, for example, if it was announced on the carton of our toothpaste that the product was 'just right for cleaning false teeth' instead of 'ideal for cleansing artificial dentures'. We can often guess the source of a piece of English from familiarity with its use: 'mix well' probably comes from a recipe, although the action of mixing is by no means limited to cookery—and 'mixes well' is more likely to be found in a testimonial.

The choice of items from the wrong register, and the mixing of items from different registers, are among the most frequent mistakes made by non-native speakers of a language. . . .

The crucial criteria of a 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: 'cleanse' 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. Compare the disc jockey's 'top twenty'; 'thinned right down' at the hairdresser's (but 'thinned out' in the garden); and the collection of 'heart' and 'bid' by contrast with 'heart' and 'beat'.

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.

M. A. K. HALLIDAY, ANGUS McINTOSH, PETER STREYENS
The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching

NOTES

8 to labour the point: to take a lot of unnecessary trouble to point something out or to emphasize it.
11 situation types: types of situation
14 *free variants of: interchangeable with
  Free variants are units of language (sounds, words, etc.) which are interchangeable in the same context or environment.
  For example, in English the sounds /s/ and /z/ are normally in phonemic contrast, as in the words sin (seen) and sain (sigh), but they are in free variation in the word 'either', which can be pronounced /iˈðər/ or /aiˈðər/. In this environment, /i/ and /ai/ are not in phonemic contrast but are free variants. (See Passage 16.) Similarly, in the case of lexical items, genuine synonyms would be free variants. (See note on line 3, Passage 5.)
  The writer of this passage is using the term to apply to groups of words or phrases. What he wants to point out is that the phrases 'an early announcement is expected' and 'apologies for absence were received' are not free variants of 'we ought to hear soon' and
LANGUAGE REGISTERS

'was sorry he couldn't make it' because they are not interchangeable
with them. They belong to quite different environments or contexts
of situation.

criteria: means of characterizing
This is the plural form of 'criterion', hence the plural form of the
verb: 'are'.

grammar and lexis (see Passages 6 and 8)
signals: indications; i.e. indications provided by the formal patterns
of grammar and lexis. (See note on line 17, Passage 5.) These indi-
cations are known as *register markers.

*collocation (see Passage 6)
specific: exclusive; particular
the disc jockey's 'top twenty': A disc jockey is a person who introduces
records or discs of popular songs over the radio. The twenty most
popular songs at any particular time are known as the 'top twenty'.

newspaper headlines: For the grammatical features of this register
see Exercise 6, Passage 4 and key.

COMPREHENSION AND DISCUSSION
QUESTIONS

1. Explain what the writer of this passage means by 'register'.
2. What determines the choice of one language register as opposed to
   another?
3. How can one language register be distinguished from another?
4. In which two ways do lexical features act as signals of particular
   registers?
5. What examples does the writer give of (a) lexical items themselves
   and (b) collocations of two or more lexical items which can identify
   a particular register?
6. Do lexical features indicate particular registers in your own language?
   Give examples.
7. Can you suggest in what type of situation you would expect to find
   'an early announcement is expected' and 'apologies for absence were
   received'? Why do you think these are not 'free variants' of 'we
   ought to hear soon' and 'was sorry he couldn't make it'? (see lines
   12-15)
8. Why do you think it would be surprising to find 'just right for cleaning
   false teeth' instead of 'ideal for cleansing artificial dentures' on a
toothpaste packet? (see lines 18-21)
9. In what situation do you think you would be likely to use a collocation
   of the lexical items 'heart' and 'bid'? (see line 44)

10. What examples does the writer give of registers which can be distin-
    guished by a particular use of grammar?
11. The choice of items from the wrong register, and the mixing of items
    from different registers, are among the most frequent mistakes made
    by non-native speakers of a language.' (lines 26-28). Give reasons
    why this should be so.
12. Explain how far the ideas expressed in this passage support the
    attitude to language expressed in Passages 18, 19, 20, and 21 by
    considering the following extracts:
    (a) 'The world is indeed a stage and society is the author of the
        play. The grown man in a modern state has to play many parts,
        and unless he knows his roles and his lines he is no use in the
        play.' (lines 23-25, Passage 18)
    (b) 'Language makes it possible for individuals to live in a society.
        It is characteristic of, indeed fundamental to, the modern point
        of view in linguistics to regard language as a social activity.'
        (lines 1-4, Passage 19)
    (c) 'All people who speak the same language have agreed to use
        certain words for certain jobs and this enables them to com-
        municate with each other.' (lines 1-3, Passage 20)
    (d) 'The only practical and reasonable standard of a word's accept-
        ability at all or in a particular sense is usage.' (lines 48-49,
        Passage 21)
    (e) 'When we observe language activity in the various contexts in
        which it takes place, we find differences in the type of language
        selected as appropriate to different types of situation.' (lines 5-8,
        Passage 22)

EXERCISES

*1 In what context of situation would you expect to find the following
    types of language? Indicate the register markers, i.e. the lexical
    and grammatical features which enable you to identify the different
    registers.
    (a) Carbon dioxide is an invisible gas with a sharp taste. It is fairly
        soluble in water. (100 c.c. of water will dissolve about 180 c.c. of
        gas at 0 °C.) Carbon dioxide will not support the combustion
        of ordinary substance. Sodium, potassium and magnesium,
        however, will burn in the gas, because the temperature of these
        substances when burning is sufficiently high to decompose the
        gas. The gas is heavier than air and in solution has an acid
        reaction, forming with water a weak acid (carbonic acid). The
most characteristic property of the gas is its ability to turn lime-water milky by the formation of a precipitate of chalk.

(b) The driver of a motor vehicle may pass to the left of a vehicle the driver of which, having indicated an intention to turn to the right, has drawn to the centre of the road and may pass a tram-car or other vehicle running on fixed rails, whether travelling in the same direction as himself or otherwise, on either side: provided that in no case shall he pass a tram-car at a time or in a manner likely to cause danger or inconvenience to other users of the road or pass on the left-hand side a tram-car, which when in motion would be travelling in the same direction as himself, while the tram-car is at rest for the purpose of setting down or taking up passengers.

(c) Heat mayonnaise, cream and milk together in a basin over hot water or in double saucepan.

Meanwhile, put chicken in buttered dish and bake in a moderately hot oven Mark 5, 375 deg., for 10–15 mins.

Pour cream sauce over chicken.

Serve in border of cooked frozen or heated canned peas.

(d) OUTSKIRTS unspoil Suffolk town, charming cottage conversion from old mill. Two bedrooms, large lounge, modern kitchen, dinette, bath room, Storage heating, two garages, large store, courtyard. 12 guineas per week, furnished. Write Box T.1176, The Times, E.C.4.


2 Make a collection of specimens of different registers from your own language and point out the lexical and grammatical features by which they can be recognized.

*3 Each one of the following lexical items would, on their own, suggest particular registers to a native English speaker. Try to identify the registers in which these lexical items would appear.

(a) offside (b) electron (c) escalation
(d) anti-cyclone (e) stylish (f) brethren
(g) demolition (h) prescription (i) inflate
(j) inflation

*4 The individual items in the following collocations are neutral, but the collocations indicate particular registers. Identify as many of them as you can.

1 Quoted in P. D. Strevens Papers in Language and Language Teaching (O.U.P.)

7 Write brief explanatory notes on the term ‘register’.

8 Summarize the main points of this passage in not more than 150 words.