Offprint

Sublanguage

Studies of Language in Restricted Semantic Domains

edited by
Richard Kittredge and John Lehrberger

Walter de Gruyter · Berlin · New York
1982

Chapter 9

Register as a Dimension of Linguistic Variation

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Anyone who wants to talk about the many varieties of a language is immediately faced with severe problems, the initial manifestations of which are largely terminological: ordinary language uses the word *style* to cover many different types of varieties – the style of Henry James, formal style, the style of jokes, newspaper headline style – while different linguists have used an array of technical terms in varying and overlapping ways. Our first purpose is to distinguish several crosscutting dimensions in the analysis of linguistic varieties; the distinctions we make are, on the whole, familiar from the literature on stylistics and sociolinguistics, though the specific terms we have chosen represent our own selections from the available stock.

To begin with, we distinguish between those aspects of speech that are associated with individual people or individual occasions, and those associated with classes of people or classes of occasions – that is, we would like to separate idiosyncratic variation and aspects of particular performances from the more systematic association of linguistic features with social groups and settings. These more systematic associations are of many different types. In one type, we find linguistic features in 'association with broadly defined biological, social and psychological states' of speakers (Giles, Scherer and Taylor 1979:343) – with such variables as age, sex, ethnic group, social class, regional origin, occupation, personality, beliefs and attitudes. Insofar as such an association involves a number of linguistic features in covariation, especially features of different sorts (from segmental or prosodic phonology, lexicon, morphology, syntax, discourse structure, or the system of orthographic representation), linguists have been inclined to use the label *dialect,* ideally 'a habitual variety of a language, . . . set off from all other such habitual varieties by a unique combination of language features' (McDavid 1971:42). But it is clear that language features serving as 'speech markers' (Giles, Scherer and Taylor 1979) do not necessarily cluster into characteristic sets, so that there is a continuum from paradigm instances of dialect to cases of one or two features associated with properties of speakers.

Before we leave the topic of dialect and related phenomena, we should clarify what constitutes an association between a linguistic feature and something nonlinguistic; this account will then serve as a model for our

later discussion. Our point of departure is the familiar asumption of stylistics that a particular variety of language involves a set of choices, or selections, from the means of expression available at all levels of structure in a language; each such choice defines an association between a linguistic feature and the circumstances in which this choice is made. We see three types of selection at work, corresponding very roughly to what Freeman (1970:intro.) has described as three different emphases in the study of literary style: (1) the selection may be such as to exclude certain features from the variety in question, so that the variety can be described (from the point of view of other varieties) as a restricted form of language, or as exhibiting special formal constraints; (2) the selection may be such as to permit certain features in the variety in question, so that the variety can be described (from the point of view of other varieties) as showing special freedom in its means of expression, or as having deviant features; and (3) the selection may be such as to favor a constellation of certain forms over others in the variety in question, so that the variety can be described (again from the point of view of other varieties) as showing a statistical preference for certain modes of expression. In the study of dialects, these three types of selection appear as differences between a given dialect and some arbitrarily chosen reference dialect. Thus, if Black English is compared to the 'standard' American English, of, say, Chicago, it shows all three sorts of selections: (1) the object pronoun *whom* is excluded; (2) *be* may appear in finite verb contexts, as in *He be sick*, a construction not possible in the standard; and (3) past perfect verb forms (for many speakers) occur more frequently than they do in the standard, so that *I had thought it was easy* may appear in contexts where the simple past would do as well.

We now turn from varieties associated with properties or states of speakers to those associated with the relationships between speakers and their interlocutors or audiences: the dimensions of intimacy/distance, casualness/formality, deference/dominance, peremptoriness/politeness, attention/inattention, and perhaps others. Here we follow Strevens and others in restricting the label *style* so that it refers only to this type of variety. Closely related to styles, but associated with specific contexts or situations and with specific functions of language in those contexts, are those varieties for which we reserve the term *register*; 'for situation-specific use, the British term *register* has gained acceptance' (Hymes 1974a:59). The restriction to specific functions tends to be emphasized in the literature on stylistics and sociolinguistics; 'A register in a given language and given speech community is defined by the uses for which it is appropriate and by a set of structural features which differentiate it from the other registers in the total repertory of the community' (Ferguson 1977:212); 'a functional style [register] is a system of interrelated language means which serves a definite aim in communication' (Galperin 1977:32).

The distinction between style and register is not always an easy one to draw, and some writers have felt it to be too fine to take account of –

> Strevens suggests a third category beside dialect and register to describe the linguistic effects of the social relation between speaker and hearer. To these variants of language he tentatively gives the name *style* or *manner of discourse*. Such varieties of language as respectful or patronizing speech come under this heading. Social relationships undoubtedly have their effect on language, but it is not necessary to make a separate category of them; they can very well be included under register. (Brook 1973:13)

while others have attacked the term *register* because of what they see as overuse of it –

> The categories which have been set up . . . are frequently inconsistently used, are incomplete, and usually have no adequate formal bases. The criticism of inconsistency can best be illustrated from the use of the term *register* (which is a fundamental notion in 'Neo-Firthian' stylistics). This term has been applied to varieties of language in an almost indiscriminate manner, as if it could be usefully applied to situationally distinctive pieces of language of any kind. The language of news-paper headlines, church services, sports commentaries, pop songs, advertising, and football, amongst others, have all been referred to as registers in one work [M. A. K. Halliday, A. MacIntosh, P. D. Strevens, *The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching*] . . . [T]here are very great differences in the nature of the situational variables involved in these uses of English, and . . . it is inconsistent, unrealistic, and confusing to obscure these differences by grouping everything under the same heading . . . (Crystal and Davy 1969:61)

Granting that the term *register* may have been applied overbroadly on some occasions, we feel that there is nevertheless an important and useful concept here, in fact a concept distinct from style. As in the case of dialect, there is a continuum of examples, including at one end paradigm associations between a set of linguistic features, the contexts in which these forms appear, and the uses to which the forms are put in these contexts. Such paradigm associations – 'baby talk' (Ferguson and Snow 1977) is a standard example, and there are many good examples in written or printed language, for instance newspaper headlines and recipes – will qualify as clear cases of registers. The continuum extends away from these to associations involving very few features and very broad or vaguely defined classes of contexts and uses; the 'language of football', characterized primarily by the occurrence of jargon and not tied to easily definable situations or functions, lies at this end of the continuum, where the utility of the label *register*

is dubious. The 'language of advertising', it seems to us, is not a characterizable variety at all. Rather, advertisements utilize a great many different styles and registers to achieve their effects. Certain types of advertisements, however, have associated with them characteristic linguistic features; we have argued elsewhere (Zwicky and Zwicky 1980) that restaurant menus, which serve both as sources of information and as advertisement for prepared food, have a register of their own. Many varieties of language, of course, lie somewhere along the continuum between baby talk and the 'language of football' – legal language, for instance.

We have claimed that register and style are distinct, but this is still to be demonstrated. A strong argument in favor of this position comes from the fact that examples in a given register may exhibit distinct styles. Headlines, for instance, may be framed in formal or informal style. Evans 1974:44 cites headlines used for the same story (about pieces of a plasterboard ceiling falling down at a celebration lunch in a new Manchester hotel) by five different newspapers; three are formal –

> Ceiling collapses at £ 2 m hotel
> Ceiling falls at hotel opening
> Ceiling collapse probed at hotel opening

while two are informal in style, one framed in the headline register, the other in ordinary conversational form –

> Crash goes ceiling at £ 2 m hotel
> WAITER!
> There's part
> of the
> ceiling
> in my
> soup.

Styles and registers show the same three sorts of selection as dialects: (1) the exclusion of certain features, as when contracted auxiliaries are not used in formal writing *(He has finished his novel);* (2) special freedom with respect to certain features, as when the copula is omitted in the headline register (TWO SUSPECTS APPREHENDED); (3) statistical preference for certain features, as when menus favor modified nouns over unmodified ones *(ice-cold shrimp nestled on fresh lettuce* rather than *shrimp on lettuce).* However, for styles and registers there are many features that can be viewed as unmarked, normal, or standard, whereas for dialects there are few such features. Thus, there are many features that may occur in all styles and registers – subject-verb agreement is required in all, and modifier-noun order is possible even in the menu register, where noun-modifier order is also available *(Gino's clams* alongside *clams Gino),* just to pick two syntactic examples from hundreds – but relatively few that are present in all dialects

(the possibility of noun-modifier order is probably constant across English dialects, but subject-verb agreement is not present in some). Indeed, it is possible to speak of an unmarked style or register, one in which all linguistic features are unmarked, but the parallel notion of an unmarked dialect makes no linguistic sense.

Returning to the concept of register, we must comment briefly on a class of phenomena which resemble registers in having associated with them a set of characteristic linguistic features, but which differ from them in not being closely identified with specific contexts and/or uses. What we have in mind here are such linguistic routines as verse forms, secret languages, riddles, proverbs, and larger genres, both conversational and literary. Many routines are conspicuously 'extralinguistic', in that the rules governing them (metrical requirements, rhyme, regular deformations) are unlike ordinary rules governing linguistic structure (see Sherzer 1976 on secret languages and Bierwisch 1970 on poetic forms). Many are structured in time; they have 'a beginning and an end, and a pattern to what comes between' (Hymes 1974b:442). Some are acquired through conscious instruction rather than tacitly. All are deployed, as structures, as parts of larger discourses, within which they may serve a variety of ends. They are distinct from dialects, styles, and registers, since they may be framed in various dialects, styles, or registers: a rhyming couplet in iambic pentameter can appear in the English of El Paso or Liverpool, in formal style or in casual style, in baby talk or headline register. Routines are thus special types of discourse structures (like question-answer pairs or greeting and farewell ceremonies) and might well not constitute a coherent subclass of such structures; we mention them here because the fact that they are conventionally associated with restrictions on linguistic form, deviant forms, and/or statistical preferences for certain linguistic forms means that they are easily confused with registers.

Our framework for viewing the systematic conventional association of linguistic features with social groups and settings then involves four major dimensions – dialect, style, register, routine – which are in principle independent of one another. In a given language and culture there will be many significant interrelationships among the structures arranged along these four dimensions, of course: a particular poetic form, for example, may be rigidly associated with a particular dialect and style. We are aware that though our scheme is not particularly novel, distinguishing the dimensions from one another can be difficult at times, and differentiating structures from one another along one dimension – just how many styles or registers are there in English, and what are they? – is admittedly vexing, though we hope to have provided a framework in which the clearest and most interesting cases can be accommodated.

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