AN ANTHROPOLOGISTLOOKS AT REGISTER: BEYOND USING BIG WORDS

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INTRODUCTION

Correct or incorrect use of register is an important aspect of how one is perceived. The reason is that register marks not only the situation but also our identity, our status within the group and our "footing," or relationship with the other interlocutors.

This paper will outline the five registers identified by Joos, their characteristics in English and ASL and their functions. It will discuss the cultural influence on register and relate this to interpreting.

The analysis then moves slightly deeper in discussing multiple affiliations and identities and the influence on register, returning to implications for interpreting. Finally, it turns to the teaching of these skills and strateges.

REGISTER AND STYLE

Register is a major part of discourse, which is, in turn, formed, organized, and shaped by culture.[1] Register reflects the frame—the situation, the referent group (the identities)—of the speakers and their footing (positions or roles within the interaction relative to each other).

Common definitions of register focus only on the situation, i.e., the frame, and ignore the footing. Alternatively, they identify the way of talking as a style used by a particular group of people using examples such as "teacher talk," "preacher talk," and so on. This focuses on the identity but again omits the role of register in establishing footing. In truth register is "the way teachers talk while teaching."

Martin Joos was the first person to write about register just over thirty years ago. Joos made a number of observations about the ways people talk in different situations, also reflecting the relative social distance and the relative level of responsibility (e.g. leadership, status, footing) or status within the group.

[1] Discourse is the level of organization above syntax (grammar). If car parts are words and phrases, an assembled car is a language, and the rules of the road including signs and signals is discourse.

As we will *see,* register reflects the speaker's identification with a group, sometimes a culture group, sometimes a subset of that culture. Americans talk like Americans, women talk like women, interpreters talk like interpreters, and so on. Thus, register and style are indicative of the following:

- the culture, the subculture,
- the situation,
- the relative roles (footing),and
- the speaker's own personality.

Register accomplishes all of this by using particular lexical items (words, terms); syntax (grammar); rhythm, or the music of the way we talk; and the interplay of turn taking.

REGISTER AND JOOS

Joos noticed that the standard English taught in the classroom was not only different from, but inappropriate for, the way children talk on the playground. This was true, he noticed, not only of children but of adults. We all adjust our way of talking to fit the situation. So called "correct" language, he noted, is more complex than using a particular kind of schoolroom vocabulary and grammar. The five regsters or five ways of talking that Joos identified are

- frozen,
- formal,
- consultative,
- conversational or casual, and
- intimate.

For those who are interested in reading Joos directly, look for his book The Five Clocks of Language.

Examples of Type

These registers are typically found in rather specific kinds of places or events. **Frozen** regster is traditional texts. It is relatively unchanging and often memorized. Examples include The Pledge of Allegiance, the ***Our*** Father, Alcoholics Anonymous" Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, ABC Stories, and Folktales such as "The Deaf Driver and the Hearing Hitchhiker" or "Plenty of . . . Hearing People]." Frozen register

is relatively unchanging and, therefore, somewhat "old fasl-uoned," archaic, or prosodic. Its meaning goes beyond the words. A frozen text is understood not so much in its parts but as a whole. The entire text becomes a Sign or Symbol, just as the country's flag is a Sign; and this is a primary characteristic of frozen register. The meaning of an ABC story is not in the events told in the story. It is told not as data. The meaning of an ASL ABC story is that the manual alphabet is used not only in a visual way (i.e., a visual representation of the written alphabet) but in a Deaf way (i.e., used not as letters but as Signs to tell a story). The typical ABC story includes feelings and visual descriptions, aspects notably lacking in written English. The structure, the form, of an ABC story is ostensibly given by "the Hearing world," but, in reality, it has been transformed into something that is clearly Deaf.

Formal register is that found in relatively large groups or places where one expert is talking to her or his peers, meetings such as Theoretical Issues in Sign Language Research, CIT conferences, or WFD (World Federation of the Deaf) or NAD (National Association of the Deaf) conventions. It is often used in print media as well, but the media or modality should not be confused with the form.

The primary characteristic of formal regster is, interestingly enough, that it follows a certain form. **As** mentioned above, teachers talk like teachers, anthropologists talk like anthropologists, Alcoholics Anonymous members talk like AA members and so on. Each profession, each subset of the culture, has its own format or way of organizing mformation as well as its own "formulaic" ways of saying h n g s. The form goes beyond "terminology" to a particular way of looking at things and a unique way of talking about them. It may seem foreign to us. and indeed an understanding of the form (the formulaic way of talking, the terminology) is essential to understanding the text.

Consultative regster is that used for doing work and, as such, is found in committee meetings, doctors' offices, classrooms, and counseling sessions. It is the register with which we as interpreters, are most familiar. The primary characteristic of consultative register is a certain businesslike air and a focus on content. The function, as we will see in the next section, is to convey information; and while the style will be influenced by the cultural subset of the speakers (e.g., doctors, physicists) and whether they are talking with peers or neophytes, the form will vary as necessary to convey mformation.

Conversational or casual regster is that found on the playground, in the cafeteria (assuming you're not talking with a workaholic), waiting for the bus, conversations at the Deaf Club, and so on. Conversational or casual repter will be primarily characterized by the inclusion of personal feelings. People will tell funny anecdotes, exchange compliments, tell sad tales, and so on, as well as exchange exciting or interesting news. Turn taking is rather rapid in English, and in ASL there are lots of feedback or back-channelling behavior.

Intimate register is that used between people who have a long history together OR who know the topic they are discussing intimately. It is not so much a closeness of feeling or affection, although this might be true as well; rather, it is a regster found where very little spoken means a lot said; very few words are necessary. Intimate register is a minimalist way of tallung. One person says something like "Just like George." and the listener understands what all is meant and implied. Families and work groups have oft told stories to which they need only refer to have virtually the full effect.

The characteristics of being traditional (frozen), formulaic (formal), focused on clarity of content (consultative), feelings (casual), and insider minimalism (intimate) are verbal and non-verbal; and they hint at the function of each regster.

FORM **AND** FUNCTION

To understand register, we must go beyond the vocabulary and even the syntax. It is woven throughout the larger discourse: the turn talung, the organization and length of the text, who gets to talk and for how long are all a part of the register.

Furthermore, the form of each register is only partly verbal. Non-verbal communication—ways of dressing, standing, sitting, and so on—is also an expression of frame, identity, and footing. Think of going into the courtroom. You can tell who the players are as surely as if their uniforms had numbers on them. You know who is the judge, which of the people present are the attorneys, the police officers, the bailiff. This dormation is clearly manifest in their clothes, their demeanor, and their position or territory, as it is in their "talk." Perhaps it is going too far to call this regıster. In any case

it is congruent with regster and, together with the spoken register, conveys mformation about frame, identity, and footing.[2]

Registers do not actually form discreet categories, but rather a continuum. There are three distinct focuses (focii):

1. tradition, "us" as a people;
2. mformation, data, task; and
3. personal, interpersonal relationships.

These are found in their pure forms in frozen, consultative, and intimate regster respectively. The other two (formal and conversational)are hybrids. Formal register is a combination in form and function of frozen and consultative. Conversational register is a combination in form and function of consultative and intimate.

The primary functions of each register follow:

- frozen—to pass on traditional ethos, beliefs, and values of the culture group and to affirm one's membership in it;
- **formal**—to pass on and affirmtraditions of the subset (e.g., AA) and to convey mformation or knowledge;
- consultative—to convey mformation with the goal of accomplishing tasks, doing work;
- conversational—learning (in English this is often an exchange of information about the business world, in ASL it is often an exchange of information about the community "gossip") and bonding, forming, or strengthening interpersonal relationships;
- **intimate**—to affirm and strengthen one's "place," not in the larger culture as with frozen register, but with regard to this person or group of people and with this topic, i.e., in this context.

The function of each register is found in all cultures. The form is, of course, meaningful only within a particular culture. This is what makes interpreting frozen register so difficult. Despite the fact that we may have ample time to work on a translation, there may be no equivalent in the target culture. Cultures vary in their ways of referring to things (vocabulary and grammar), the things referred to (e.g., musical

[2] Combinations are also telling. For example it is typical of academics to dress casually but talk formally. This combination itself is a mark of "register."

instruments or genres, local agencies, or Deaf leaders), and the value or Meaning of the things referred to (e.g., the Deaf school, the relay, sports).

FUNCTION AND INTERPRETING

Using register as a key to unlock (and mark) a text, an interpreter can recogruze (and convey) its function. Let us say, for example, that you are interpreting the Pledge of Allegance. The function of this pledge is to reaffirm membership in the culture and to reaffirm the ethos, beliefs, and values of America. How do Deaf people fit into this scene? Certainly many Deaf people are strongly patriotic and identify themselves as Americans. How does one handle a text whch has meaning as a whole, in which the entire text functions as a Sign?

The interpretation itself adds another layer of meaning. What does it mean to be a Deaf American, to need the text interpreted? What does it mean if the text is interpreted into PSE / CVS, into ASL, into ASL with an exegesis? In some instances, the solution is to represent the text with as little interpretation as possible and then render a commentary (an in a voice interpretation of an ABC story—letting the story stand for itself as a visual piece, adding a commentary rather than a verbatim interpretation). These questions cannot be answered without considering the audience, the person or people for whom you are interpreting.

The interpreter's strategy will depend on the people involved; how enculturated they are; and, **not only the function of the text itself, but the function of the interpretation.** Why would one preserve the organization and referents as in PSE / CVS; why translate into ASL (or spoken English)? What is lost and what is gained? **The interpreter must consider not only the function of the text but** why she or he has been asked to interpret in the first place. [3]

Consultative register is the easiest. While we often have time before a specific assignment to study and prepare a translation for a formal presentation, content is easier to translate than a foreign tradition and form. In consultative repter, making the content clear is the burden (and focus) of the interlocutors; thus, the interpreter is less alone in her / his task.

[3] Taking the word "interpretation" in its most generic sense think of different signers' interpretations of "The Star Spangled Banner." Perhaps you will recall the tremendous outcry when Rosanne Barr was asked to sing this song on national television and gave it a very non-traditional interpretation.

Casual and intimate regsters are the most challenging. Here, the relationship between and among the interlocutors is the focus, and the intrusion of an interpreter (as well as the barriers of culture) make this difficult to impossible. Here, there is no time for study or preparation; and to ask for clarification often breaks the rhythm, the flow, and detracts from or destroys the meaning. Intimate register can sometimes be breached *cross* culturally if the interlocutors are otherwise intimately familiar with the content, the task, and the personalities of the other parties. Together they can reaffirm bonds of beliefs and values (world view) or experience even without a common language. New mothers' support groups or WFD board meetings are sometimes able to achieve intimacy.

Each situation is unique. The overall task or focus is set for the interpreter by the situation and, hence, the register, but modified by the cultures between whch one is interpreting (the limits and possibilities of those cultures and languages) and by the background of the interlocutors. A *cross* cultural discussion of register is thus more complex than simple register alone.

CULTURE **AND** REGISTER

Dominant American Deaf culture is a socic-centric culture, a culture focused on synthesis, an "artistic" culture. Dominant American (non-Deaf) culture is not. It is an analytical, "scientific" culture. Edward T. Hall first noticed this pattern and called socio-centric cultures "High Context" or "polychronic" cultures and analytic cultures "Low Context" or "monochronic" cultures. It was for other anthropologists, however, to elaborate the elements and their expressions in a variety of cultures.

Deaf discourse is socic-centric. It is a close, an intimate, discourse of the familiar, one which emphasizes feelings and interpersonal relations. It is the discourse of people with much shared knowledge and sentiment.

The sigruficance of these characteristics in a discussion of regster is that ASL texts appear at each level to be more intimate than their English counterparts. Thus intimate register in ASL hardly uses any Signs moving even more than English into non-manual communication. Even conversational register is relatively intimate. Conversants share much of the same knowledge and constantly inform one another so that they all remain "insiders." Think of consultative register, how much Deaf ASL teachers in a college setting involve their students during class time compared with

non-Deaf English teachers in a similar setting, how often they use personal experiences or anecdotes to convey concepts, how often they include feelings in their discourse of even inanimate objects or abstract principles. Perhaps the function of rhetorical questions (found so much more commonly in ASL formal register than in English formal repter) is a mark of this intimacy, an involvement, an inclusion of the audience even when they cannot be expected to respond personally. ASL texts include more personal experiences and more feelings than their equivalents in English.

Hearing people often remark these differences. If they are learning Sign, they will likely think of ASL speakers as engaging and "delightful" (i.e., artistic) comparing them favorably to lectures by non-Deaf professionals which they characterize as "dry" or "uninteresting" (i.e., more formal, more distant). Hearing people who are not so positively disposed wonder just why they are having to listen to all these stones in what is supposed to be a professional or business setting.

The goal is not to make Deaf people sound Hearing or Hearing people sound Deaf. The goal is to represent the identity, the status, and style of the speaker as well as to match the situation and its task.

Cultural Adjustment in the Interpretation

New interpreters going from voice to Sign hesitate to give up fingerspelling for what seems to be a "lack of precision" while they struggle to render ASL into English without having it lose its "color." The danger is that we try to preserve the cultural flavor of the original (precision versus color) and in so doing distort the audience's perception of the speaker.

Because the dominant culture is (a particular variety of) Hearing culture, our strategy must accommodate issues of power. It is not simply a matter of adjusting for the formality of English and the intimacy of ASL. That members of the dominant culture seem detached and dry has an entirely different impact than making the Deaf speaker seem inappropriately folksy and casual. The former leaves the Deaf audience reinforced in their view of Hearing professionals as cold and uncaring. The latter leaves the Hearing audience reinforced in their view that Deaf people are entertaining but not educated.

The basic challenge is to make a competent Deaf linguist sound like a competent Deaf linguist; an articulate, caring AIDS worker sound like an articulate, caring *AIDS* worker; a well informed Deaf speaker, well informed and so on.

Finally, our challenge is to convey the speaker's personality and style.

MORE COMPLEX: MULTIPLE IDENTITIES, MULTIPLE FUNCTIONS, PARTS WITHIN THE WHOLE

Texts come in parts or sections, and often these sections have different regsters (and functions). Before a speech, there is an introduction to the speaker. A speech is often followed by a question and answer period. Business meetings often begin and end with a social time, a time to maintain human connections. Some groups do this more formally than others, but the focus is on the personal relationshps, not the content. Courtroom proceedings include the frozen "Hear ye, hear ye"; the formal listing of charges; and the consultative discussion of procedure and questioning of witnesses.

Thus, knowing the setting is not enough to determine the register and style. Librarians are more formal than counselors. The informality of counselors is different from that of artists. A court room session is not, plain and simple, a court room setting. Identity is not simple, it is complex. I am not only an American; I am a bi-cultural, bi-lingual American. I am a woman, over fifty and White. I am a scientist, a teacher, and an interpreter. I live in the Northwest. All of this is represented in subtle and obvious ways in my language, my style of speaking. The formality is determined not only by the setting but by

- the subset of the culture,
- the individual participants, and
- the segment of the text.

How can these variations and subtleties be conveyed through an interpretation? This goes beyond the application of theory or formula to a sense of the music. Ultimately, interpretation is an art not a science. The interpretation of style is a dance. Interpreters must focus and try to absorb the rhythms and melody of a variety of speakers, become comfortable with them so that these rhythms and melodies can be drawn out and used in the work of interpretation.