

Register

A register is a linguistic repertoire that is associated, culture internally, with particular social practices and with persons who engage in such practices. The use of a register conveys to a member of the culture that some typifiable social practice is linked indexically to the current occasion of language use, as part of its context. If the current occasion is independently recognizable as an instance of the social practice, the use of the register seems appropriate to that occasion; conversely, switching to the register may itself reconfigure the sense of occasion, indexically entailing that the associated social practice is now under way.

Formally, registers differ in the type of repertoire involved (e.g., lexemes, prosody, sentence collocations), and many registers involve repertoires of more than one kind. From the standpoint of function, distinctive registers are associated with social practices of every kind—such as law, medicine, prayer, science, magic, prophecy, commerce, military strategy, sports commentary, the observance of respect and etiquette, the expression of civility, social status, etc.

Given this range, a repertoire-based view of register remains incomplete in certain essential respects: such a view cannot explain how particular repertoires become differentiable from the rest of the language, or how they come to be associated with social practices at all. It implies also that a register is a closed and bounded set of forms over which all members of a language community have identical competence. Yet registers typically have a socially distributed existence over populations, so that all members of a language community are not equally familiar with all of its registers. These aspects of a register's repertoires—their identifiability, pragmatic value, and social distribution—are best understood by attention to the metalinguistic practices of language users.

All empirical studies of registers rely on the metalinguistic ability of native speakers to discriminate between linguistic forms, to make evaluative judgments about variant forms. In the special case where a linguist studies a

register of his or her native language, such evaluations are available in the form of introspectable intuitions. In general, however, linguists rely on native evaluations that are overtly expressed in publicly observable semiotic behavior. Such behavior may consist of language use: e.g., linguistic utterances that explicitly describe a register's forms and associated values; or utterances that implicitly evaluate the indexical properties of co-occurring forms (as responses to them, for example) without describing what they evaluate; such behavior may include non-linguistic semiotic activity as well, such as gestures, or the extended patterning of kinesic and bodily movements characteristic of ritual responses to the use of many registers.

All such behaviors are metalinguistic in nature since they tell us something about the properties of linguistic forms, whether by decontextualizing the forms and describing their properties or by evaluating their effects while the forms are still in play. Such evaluations tell us something, in particular, about the pragmatics of language—i.e., the capacity of linguistic forms to index culturally recognizable activities, categories of actors, etc., as elements of the context of language use—thus constituting the class of metapragmatic evaluations of language. In their most overt form, such evaluations consist of explicit metapragmatic discourse, i.e., discourse that describes the pragmatics of speech forms. Several genres of metapragmatic discourse occur naturally in all language communities—e.g., verbal reports and glosses of language use; names for registers and associated speech genres; stereotypes about users of a repertoire; proscriptions on usage; standards of appropriate usage; positive or negative assessments of the social worth of the register.

Registers have a socially distributed existence over populations of speakers because all speakers of a given language do not acquire competence in all of its registers during the normal course of language socialization. In the case of registers of scientific discourse, competence in the use and interpretation of technical terminologies requires several years of specialized formal study. In the case of registers associated with particular venues of commercial activity (viz. the stock exchange, the publishing house, the advertising firm), proficiency in specialized terms is typically attained through socialization in the workplace. In the case of registers of respect and etiquette, only individuals born into privileged circumstances tend to acquire competence over the most elaborate locutions. In many societies, certain lexical registers function as "secret languages" (viz., thieves' argots, the registers of religious ritual, magical incantation, etc.) since their use is restricted to specialized groups by metapragmatic proscriptions against teaching the forms to outsiders.

Thus, two members of a language community may both be acquainted with a lexical register, but not have the same degree of competence in its use. Many speakers can recognize certain registers of their language but cannot fully use or interpret them. The existence of registers therefore results not just in the interlinkage of linguistic repertoires and social practices but in the creation of social boundaries within society, partitioning off language users into distinct groups through differential access to particular registers and to the social practices that they mediate; through the ascription of social worth or stigma to particular registers, their usage, or their users; and

through the creation and maintenance of asymmetries of power, privilege, and rank, as effects dependent on the above processes. In such cases, social regularities involving the value of speech motivate socially regular judgments about types of speakers.

The existence of registers is thus associated with social regularities of speech valorization, potentially involving different aspects of language use. Such social regularities are identified when metapragmatic judgments offered by one speaker are found to be socially replicable—that is, shared, by many categories of speakers within a population. Hence, the replicability of metapragmatic discourse serves as a criterion on the social distribution of register values. By this criterion, the social sharedness of registers is always a matter of degree since the replicability of register judgments over an entire language community is only a limiting special case, rarely observed empirically.

The social existence of a register is therefore not a static, all-or-nothing fact even though the social authority of many registers derives precisely from the appearance of their permanence. The cultural en-register-ment of a speech repertoire is itself a social process, varying in degrees of completeness of consensus, in the social domains of language users who subscribe to a given set of enregistered values (vs. those who engage in counter-valorizations), in the social mechanisms by which authoritative values are formulated and disseminated, in the degree of institutionalization of the metadiscourse that typifies the register.

In the case of highly authoritative, firmly institutionalized and widely circulating metadiscourses, the register values promoted by the metadiscourse are socially shared to a high degree (i.e., are comparably recognizable and, in some cases, describable, by many members of society), thus constituting a widespread social regularity of speech valorization. For example, the “standard language” is perhaps the most robustly institutionalized register of any language, one whose existence in modern societies itself depends on the existence and proper functioning of a network of metadiscursive institutions, such as dictionaries, grammars, pedagogic manuals, school curricula, boards of education, national academies, and so on.

(See also *codes, competence, expert, genre, gesture, indexicality, prayer, prophecy, socialization, variation*)

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