Register and Style as Distinct and 'Functional' Varieties of Language

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Abstract

This paper assesses the relationship between register and style, the prominent differences between them and how both are responsible for sociolinguistic context. It further argues that register and style in relation to context are 'functional' manifestations or varieties of a given language since they usually mark the changes that occur in language as a result of immediate sociolinguistic 'necessities' over and above the traditional dialectal and social varieties. Language users are usually more conscious of their 'immediate' linguistic environments (contexts) in terms of communication goals than they usually are of their 'remote' regional or social background and this informs a selection of 'appropriate' linguistic items to adjust as it were to those language situations or demands.

Introduction

Language has been a subject of serial investigations from the time man became 'conscious' or aware of its significance in communication and there seems to be no end to further analyses of its complexities.

The complex characteristic ascribed to language in this paper is informed by a consideration of the manifold manifestations of the concept in scholarly contexts. Apart from the general components like grammar, phonology and semantics through which language can be assessed, there are other 'faces' of language which can further be investigated in various sub-fields like sociolinguistics, pragmatics, stylistics, among others, depending on interest. Register and style usually are situated in the social and stylistic aspects of language and are traditionally considered as varieties of language.

Varieties of Language

It is needful to understand what characterizes a variety of language, as this will provide a better platform to evaluate the twin linguistic concepts of register and style. There are however different and sometimes opposing views by scholars as to what constitutes a language variety just as there are many varieties.

Ballard looks at variety from a perspective of 'form' in her categorization of English "as a specific language" (8). English in her view is "specific" when compared to the French language or the German language. But, as she observes, studying English only as a specific form of language is not holistic since it (English) "can take different forms" or varieties (8). She adds that

> …the English spoken in America varies in several ways from the English spoken in Britain. And within Britain, there are many regional variations in the pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar of English, just as there are many variations in America (8).

Ballard not only identifies the two dominant manifestations of English, which are, the British and the American, but also recognizes other 'many regional variations' in both places. The regional variation is characterized by Romaine as "regional dialect" and "reveals where we come from" while "social dialect" or variety reveals "what our status is" (21).

The term 'variety' according to Hudson can be applied to the different manifestations of language as a phenomenon or as a "specific", to use Ballard's term. Hudson defines a variety of language as "a set of linguistic items with similar social distribution" (24). This definition, as he notes, merges the 'specific forms' like English and French with their 'manifestations' thus giving them equal status. This obvious 'merger' is no doubt responsible for his claim that varieties do not exist after all since there are no clear ways to delimit them. According to him, "all that exists [sic] are people and items, and people may be more or less similar to one another in the items they have in their language" (40).

Romaine on her part regards varieties "as a clustering of features" (21). In her view, variety and dialect are interchangeable. She characterizes dialect as "a subordinate variety of a language" (2). From Romaine's position, a dialect or variety is a lower manifestation of the specific language; a 'child' of the 'parent' language. Her view recognizes a hierarchy between a variety and the specific language. Romaine's observation clearly delimits one form of language from another which is albeit contestable in that some regional varieties may not correctly be given a "subordinate" ascription when speakers of such varieties have some linguistic autonomy, independence or prestige. If, for instance, American English and British English are both "subordinate varieties" of English, it then becomes difficult to say which of them constitutes 'the English language'. It would then be more appropriate to simply refer to them as "varieties" of English.

It is clear from these views that varieties exist in language either as clusters of features in a particular language

or as distinct pockets of linguistic forms. Geographical distribution and social stratification are however not the only determinants of linguistic variation. In practice, the use of language goes beyond where we come from (region) or who we are (social status). It also includes what we want to achieve through language at any given time or place. This is partly a pragmatic concern relating to speech acts and context as well as linguistic appropriateness and choice. The goal of any speech situation is essentially to communicate or socialize, notwithstanding the variety we use, and the functions we assign to the linguistic items at our disposal are not homogeneous. This is similar to Hudson's view that "the defining characteristic of each variety is the relevant relation to society – in other words, by whom, and when, [or for what] the items concerned are used" (25). This position may be applicable to linguistic variation in practice if what Hudson identifies as 'variety' is considered beyond geographical or social distribution since these are not sufficient to delimit linguistic boundaries. There often exists an 'intrusion' of varieties in both cases and this undoubtedly informs Hudson's unsustainable claim that "there is no way of delimiting varieties, and we must therefore conclude that varieties do not exist" (40).

The Place of Register, Style and Sociolinguistic Context
Since regional and social varieties of language clearly merge in practice (language continuum), it becomes imperative to account for the changes that occur in a language as a result of use over and above these 'traditional' varieties. In other words, dialectal and social varieties are not the only varieties that exist in a given language. They are not the only changes that occur in the form of a given language. Variation in language is equally a question of 'function' or 'use' other than geography or status. It is basically brought about by linguistic 'necessities' and 'choices' rather than just regional identification or social convenience. This is a clear departure from Hudson's position that varieties may not exist in language as a result of difficulty in demarcation. We can admit with him that "people may be more or less similar to one another in the items they have in their language" but they may not use these items in the same way and in every linguistic setting, in spite of their regional or social affinities. The aggregate of the linguistic goal and appropriateness account for register and style identified as the 'functional varieties' in the use of a given language. These linguistic variables, to some degree, provide ground for changes in the use of available linguistic resources.

Register
In a traditional sense, "register is a variety of a language used for a particular purpose or in a particular setting" (Wikipedia). This simple presentation contains two important variables: purpose and setting. It suggests that the resources of a language can be variously used based on the goal of communication as well as the speech context. These distinctive features of register are elaborated in Ballard's characterization of the concept thus:

> Register is the collective term for various situational and functional aspects of a text. In other words, register is the sum of a text's subject matter, its purpose, its mode (essentially, spoken or written), its genre (the type of text it is) and the relationship that exists between its participants (namely, the writer or speaker and the audience). These factors all work together to influence the choices language users make when constructing discourse (181).

The 'situational' and 'functional' aspects of language in use comprise inherently the defining variables such as subject matter, purpose, genre, mode, as well as relationship between interlocutors. These are essentially the constituent elements of sociolinguistic context or speech event – an obvious synonym for register in line with Ballard's characterization – and which in turn influence the way speakers or writers use a language.
Wales similarly looks at register from a sociolinguistic and stylistic point of view as "a variety of language defined according to the situation" (397), while Yule considers register as

> …a conventional way of using language that is appropriate in a specific context, which may be identified as situational (e.g. in church), occupational (e.g. among lawyers) or topical (e.g. talking about language) (210-11).

According to Yule, register has to do with 'appropriateness' in the use of language. In this sense, a language user is conditioned by the variables of situation or place, the roles of the users and the topic of discourse. Thus register accounts for appropriateness in the use of linguistic items in given speech situations.
 Romaine explains register as language according to use. In her words, "register gives a clue about what we are doing. The concept of register is typically concerned with variations in language conditioned by uses rather than users…" (21). Romaine's view centres on the functional aspect of language use. Register in this regard is a 'functional' variety of language since the emphasis is not on the users (their background in terms of region or social status) but on the 'use'. Register is thus a variety that is necessitated by a given speech event and which is usually drawn from the available regional and social varieties. Hudson lends credence to this assertion thus:

> Each time a person speaks or writes, he not only locates himself with reference to the rest of society, but also locates his act of communication to a complex classificatory scheme of communicative behaviour (49).

This "complex classificatory scheme of communicative behaviour" is no doubt the sum total of the situational

and functional variables that make up register.

Halliday holds that register is determined by what is taking place, who is taking part, and what part the language is playing. Thus, he classifies register into field, tenor and mode. Field is the activity associated with the language used or the subject matter. Tenor is the specific role of the participants as well as their relationship and mode is the symbolic organization of the situation or "the means by which communication takes place notably, by speech or writing" (in Hudson, 49). For example, the subject matter (field) of a discourse could be religion, through a written or spoken means (mode), among the clergy on the one hand or a cleric and the 'laity' on the other hand (tenor).

Crystal and Davy (71) characterize register as "province" which according to them is the identification of "an utterance with those variables in an extra-linguistic context defined with reference to the kind of occupational or professional activity being engaged in." Register in their view is restricted to occupation or profession, a role which usually gives away the occupational identity of the language user from the predominant linguistic items being employed.

As a functional or situational variety of language, register is closely related to a speech event or sociolinguistic context. Yule spells out the defining elements of a speech event and how they collectively bring about variation in language use:

> …there is enormous variation in what people say and do in different [speech] circumstances…to describe the sources of that variation, we would have to take account of a number of criteria. For example, we would have to specify the roles of speaker and hearer (or hearers) and their relationship(s), whether they were friends, strangers, men, women, young, old, of equal or unequal status…All of these factors will have an influence on what is said and how it is said. We would have to describe what the topic of conversation was and in what setting it took place (127).

These linguistic variables that make up a speech context according to Yule generally influence what we say or write or what we do with the linguistic items at our disposal and particularly how we put them to use.

Style

Style as a linguistic concept is very flexible and dynamic undoubtedly due to its "potential for diverse application" (Azuike, 77). Thus, it has been a subject of different ascriptions and characterizations. Azuike provides six broad theoretical sub-headings under which the concept has been characterized namely: "(1) a deviation from a norm; (2) a manifestation of the individual; (3) content and/or form; (4) choice between alternative ways of expressing the same idea; (5) product of context; (6) and simply as good or beautiful writing" (111). Style as product of context is the sub-categorization that is closely knitted to register and therefore receives the emphasis in this paper.

Since register and style (situated in context) operate within the same socio-cultural domain, it becomes imperative to distinguish between the two. Hudson passively suggests that "'style' is sometimes used instead of [Halliday's] 'tenor' – an aspect of register which "depends on the relations between participants" (49). He however advises against such use since, according to him, "'style' is used in a lay sense to mean roughly the same as 'register'" (49). Hudson in one sense makes style a 'subset' of register by characterizing it as 'tenor' and another sense makes the two of equal status. Register and style are however distinct in practical applications in sociolinguistic contexts.

Register is an aggregate of communication variables such as 'what', 'why', 'where', 'when' and 'whom' (field and tenor). Although Hudson uses 'how' to denote 'mode' in terms of the communication medium, it would be more appropriate for the purpose of distinction to use 'how' to denote the 'manner' of communication. The medium or means has to do largely with 'material' or 'organ' (written or spoken) while manner is 'attitudinal'. This little distinction may help to suggest that tenor (relations between participants) may affect the manner of communication while other variables like field and mode may be unchanged. In this regard, style may be characterized as 'manner of expression' while mode is the medium of presentation. With this understanding, register and style may not be used interchangeably since the former would determine the latter. An example from Hudson may help to clarify this distinction;

> …in writing one letter a person might start: 'I am writing to inform you that…', but in another he might write: 'I just wanted to let you know that…' (49).

Hudson concludes that

> the two examples of letter-openings…differ in tenor, one being impersonal (addressed to someone with whom the writer only has formal relations) and the other personal, but their field and mode are the same (49).

The difference in what Hudson notes as 'tenor' may appropriately be regarded as a difference in 'tone' or 'style' in conformity with the appropriate formal or informal speech style. Tenor as a constituent element of register is a major determinant of style but may not be also known as style.

 Azuike to a great extent, shares Hudson's view in positing that tenor (tone or style) is usually altered with the

realization that an effective style of communication is achieved through a conscious selection of appropriate contextual features in accordance with the speech event (80).

Romaine observes that style is a "notion related to register…which can range from formal to informal depending on social context, relationship of the participants, social class, sex, age, physical environment, and topic" (22). Style, from this point of view, is a "related notion" to register. The relationship is no doubt hinged on the former 'depending' on the latter. Hence, there is a clear separation between the "relationship of the participants" (tenor) and style.

Meyers portrays style of language as "levels of usage" – the different ways of speaking or writing that each individual has apart from regional or social dialects. These levels of usage in his opinion may be informed by subject matter, age or status of the intended audience or the occasion (360-361).

Wales characterizes style as manner of expression, differences in expression according to differences in communication situations, distinctiveness, choice and deviation from a norm. As manner of expression, she observes that style is usually evaluative and as a choice entails a conscious selection of particular linguistic features from the available repertoire (435-437). Her notions of style as manner of expression and differences in expression according to differences in communication situations aptly capture the thin line that has been identified as a distinguishing feature between register and style.

From this array of 'stylistic' characterizations, it is clear that register and style do not have the same application. Register often determines the appropriate speech style that is applicable in any given speech event. Style is a manner of expressing both the familiar and the unfamiliar linguistic items by a language user in discourse. As Azuike puts it, "style is deemed to be conditioned by the sociocultural factors which influence the making of an utterance, whether written or spoken" (119). The "sociocultural factors" are what constitute register or sociolinguistic context.

The Formality Scale

Since register influences manner of expression, a speaker or writer usually switches between formal and informal speech forms in order to 'adapt' to different linguistic contexts basically for the purpose of linguistic appropriateness. Yule provides a further insight into this linguistic flexibility:

> Formal style is when we pay more careful attention to how we're speaking and informal style is when we pay less attention. They are sometimes described as 'careful style' and 'casual style'. A change from one to the other by an individual is called **style-shifting** (208).

Yule however limits his assessment of formality to 'speaking' even though it is also applicable in writing and this is no doubt informed by his characterization of style as "speech style". He further provides two broad categories to include 'careful' and 'casual' which Joos elaborated into five styles or manners of expression in spoken English – frozen, formal, consultative, casual and intimate.

1. **Frozen** – an extremely formal, printed, unchanging language such as biblical quotations. It often contains archaisms.
2. **Formal** – a one-way participation which usually involves no interruptions. It also involves the use of technical vocabulary or jargon. "Fuzzy semantics" or exact definitions are important. Strangers usually introduce themselves in this context.
3. **Consultative** – a two-way participation in which background information is provided. A prior knowledge is not usually assumed. "Back-channel behaviour" such as "uh huh", "I see" etc. is common and interruptions are allowed.
4. **Casual** – a colloquial style used among friends and acquaintances. Provision of background information is not necessary and ellipsis (contractions) and slang are common. Interruptions are also a common feature of the casual style.
5. **Intimate** – an extremely informal and non-public communication style in which intonation says more than words or grammar. It also has a private vocabulary.

Source: Wikipedia/register (sociolinguistics).

Some of the distinguishing features of formal and informal styles in English are summarized below:

Formal:
- More of complex, longer sentences
- Avoidance of contractions and abbreviations
- Use of passive voice
- More 'educated' and Latinate words with a low frequency vocabulary
- Avoidance of the imperative form
- Use of single-word verbs.

Informal:
- Short words and sentences

-    Contractions and abbreviations
-    Colloquial language, Anglo Saxon or Germanic words
-    Phrasal verbs (multi-word or multi-part verbs)
-    May use the imperative form.

Source: http//corpus.wikispaces.com

Apart from the defining formality or informality of style as conditioned by register, there is another but subtle distinction between these two categories. While register is generally and sometimes strictly evaluated in terms of vocabulary, style can be assessed at the levels of vocabulary, syntax and pronunciation. To this end, Yule identifies jargon – "a special technical vocabulary…associated with specific area of work or interest" – as one of the defining features of a register (211). Romaine corroborates this view in stating that "Vocabulary differences – either a special vocabulary or special meanings for ordinary words –are most important in distinguishing different registers" (21). And by way of contrasting the two, she adds;

> Stylistic differences can also be reflected in vocabulary, as in 'The teacher distributed the new books' versus 'The teacher gave out the new books'; syntax, as in an increased use of the passive voice (in English) in formal speech ('The meeting was cancelled by the president' versus 'The president called off the meeting'); and pronunciation (compare, for example, colloquial pronunciations such as 'readin', 'singin' with more formal ones such as 'reading', singing') (22).

These examples are clear departures from a view of register and style as synonyms. Hence, it may be established that they are distinct manifestations of language in use.

Conclusion

Context greatly contributes to language variation in sociolinguistics in much the same way as it contributes to meaning in pragmatics. Register and style are the major constituents of sociolinguistic context and determine how language users employ the linguistic items at their disposal, whether in consideration of the subject matter, the constitution of the audience, the means of presentation or the manner of expression. These sociolinguistic varieties of language do not however overlap in terms of definition. Different styles or registers are therefore considered 'functional' varieties of language since they are informed by sociolinguistic 'necessities'.

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