A new approach to register variation: the missing link

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to direct the attention of the specialists towards the notion of linguistic register in order to promote new systematic methods of analysing its current span of variation. Despite its still unclear definition and frequent amalgamation with other varieties, the movement across registers is one of the most effective and frequent communicative tools that a language has to adapt itself to the diverse private, social and professional settings. However, this type of variation is one of the most difficult to be perceived, learnt and correctly used by foreign speakers and, in general, all non-effective communicators. As this article shows in the first part, the existing theory and models of analysis need to be reviewed and updated in order to provide clearer distinctions and more practical parameters of research. The second part of the article proposes a basic method of approaching current register variation systematically, emphasizing the most controversial aspects in the analysis of registers and pointing out the need to overcome these difficulties in order to promote more practical studies, other useful typologies and new pedagogical materials on this type of variation.

Key words: sociolinguistics, language variation, register, context, communication

Resumen

Nueva perspectiva sobre la variación de los registros lingüísticos: el eslabón perdido

El objetivo del presente artículo es dirigir la atención de los especialistas hacia la noción de registro lingüístico con el fin de promover nuevos métodos de analizar los registros actuales. A pesar de la falta de claridad en su definición y la frecuente confusión con otros tipos de variación lingüística, el movimiento a través de toda la gama de registros es uno de los instrumentos comunicativos más efectivos y de uso más frecuente que posee una lengua para adaptarse a los diversos entornos privados, sociales y profesionales. Sin embargo, este movimiento es uno de los mecanismos más difíciles de percibir, aprender

y utilizar correctamente, sobre todo en el caso de hablantes extranjeros y comunicadores poco efectivos. Como se muestra en la primera parte del artículo, la teoría y los modelos de análisis existentes necesitan ser revisados para poder generar distinciones internas y parámetros de investigación más claros. En la segunda parte del artículo se propone un método básico de análisis que permite la ejemplificación sistemática de los registros lingüísticos actuales, enfatizando los aspectos más controvertidos que operan en este tipo de análisis y la necesidad de superarlos para conseguir elaborar estudios más prácticos, tipologías más útiles y nuevos materiales pedagógicos.

Palabras clave: sociolingüística, variación lingüística, registro, contexto, comunicación

Introduction

Since variability is inherent in human language and most of this variation is systematic, from the 70s linguistics has focused on language use and the systematic ways in which users exploit linguistic resources. From this perspective, many studies have approached linguistic variation analysing linguistic features such as hedging or modality, language dimensions or functions which make a discourse more informative or narrative, and genres such as every day conversation or newspaper articles, just to mention a few examples; most of them compiled in famous corpora such as the *Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English* (MICASE), the *British National Corpus* or the *International Corpus of English* (Biber, 1995, 1998; Reppen et al., 2002).

Nevertheless, as most specialists admit (Reppen et al., 2002: VII), "analyzing the influence factors on linguistic variation present difficult methodological challenges." Among these difficulties, we may include carrying empirical analyses of natural texts, collecting texts from a wide range of speakers and contextual factors, and establishing clear differences among all the varieties interacting in a speech event. These three obstacles, and in particular the third one, have become the key stone of the avoidance by many authors of questionable concepts such as the concept of "communicative register." There have been important well-known attempts to define the term and thanks to these proposals we can have a better idea of the uniqueness and specificity of the concept. However, as it can be observed in real practice and throughout most published research on language variation, many specialists still use the word "register" in an unspecific and unclear way, in many cases exchanging the word randomly with the other types of variation, such as genre, style, etc. This switch is probably done in the belief that it might be better understood in that way, but sometimes it is because what they are actually investigating or making reference to is not register itself but another of these other language varieties. In practice, it seems apparent that a unified and widely accepted clear use of register does not exist as a

type of language variation different from the other varieties –as it happens, for example, with the concept of genre and idiolect. If language variation as a whole is seen as a chain of specific choices made by users according to diverse communicative aspects brought into play, register variation seems to be a "missing link" inside this chain, without a clearly defined position, nature and usage.

Taking these factors into account the purpose of this paper is, firstly, to direct the attention of specialists towards the notion of register, its still unclear definition, current random use and frequent amalgamation with other varieties; and secondly, to emphasize the need of facing the main controversial areas and approaching the subject from new perspectives which help to understand its main defining components, its specific behaviour in a particular language or across languages, its specific influence in daily communication and its complete scale of internal variation.

Register analysis: a critical overview

Linguistic theory only counts on a few theoretical approaches to carry out systematic research into current register variation and, as this paper will point out, even these well-known approaches do not seem to cast enough light on the subject to promote practical studies, useful typologies and effective pedagogical materials on this type of variation. For example, Coultas' treatise, *Language and Social Contexts* (2003), clearly gives information on variation regarding power, gender and regional talk but deals with register variation only by mentioning some "formality" parameters (Coultas, 2003: 9). It seems that the scale of formality is still the most useful way of approaching, using and assessing this type of variation. Obviously, although the concept of register can be included inside the general field of language variation, as underlined by Biber and Finegan (1994), its true nature places the analyst in a highly delicate research area located in the junction of important fields such as sociolinguistics, language in use, pragmatics, applied linguistics, discourse and conversation analysis, speech act theory, code switching, institutional linguistics and corpus linguistics, among others. It is not easy to study a concept with such a huge range of research levels and with such a fixed dual conceptualization –which have, in fact, become almost fossilized in daily practice– therefore restricting its variation to the broad swinging usage between the concepts of formality and informality (Giménez Moreno, 1994).

A "register," from a general social perspective, can be seen as the adequate manner of expressing your message depending on the social situation where that message is communicated; a communicative frequency or wavelength chosen by the individual

from the whole scale of possibilities given by a language to express a certain idea properly within its context. Contextual variation started to be an interesting field of research and study at the beginning of the 20th century together with all the emergent anthropological and ethnological descriptive analyses of the time. Following the work of pioneers such as Malinowski (1923) and Firth (1935) on the importance of the context in language variation, the term "register" was suggested by Reid in 1956 with reference to the capacity of human language to adapt itself to different social situations. With this proposed terminology, Reid was pointing out that this adaptation operates within a vertical or transversal mode/axis with regard to the other types of language variation that operate in a horizontal mode/axis. A few years later, this split or bifurcation was specified by Halliday et al. (1964) establishing a distinction between dialectal variation dependant on the user's characteristics and register variation dependant on the circumstances of the usage. At that time a few interesting typologies appeared, being still useful to establish primary differentiations among registers.

An approach of special interest is the pioneer classification proposed by Joos (1961). Although this author still mixed the terms "style" and "register" and did not provide a detailed linguistic account of the main differences among the proposed styles, he transcended the traditional dichotomy between formal and informal language and established correlations between five types of "style" (frozen, formal, consultative, casual, and intimate) and the age (senile, mature, teenage, child and baby), the breadth (genteel, puristic, standard, provincial, and popular) and the social responsibility of the speaker (best, better, good, fair, and bad). Through this perspective, Joos pointed out that the choices dependent on the user and on the use are closely related and can interfere with each other; also that the relationship between the interlocutors and the purpose of the message are key distinctive parameters when distinguishing among registers. According to this approach, the "consultative style" is the most neutral and from which the other four registers depart. This style is used with strangers and unfamiliar interlocutors; its main function is interaction and the speakers have to provide as much information as possible, not assuming any common ground and ensuring that the basic content and norms are shared. On the informal side, the author places the "casual style" on a first level, being the style used with known or familiar interlocutors who share the same communicative norms and mechanisms. He places the "intimate style" on a second level of informality being used inside exclusive groups of speakers who have private or personal ties and do not need to refer to any general public information. On the other side of the consultative style, there is also a first level, where Joos (1961) places the "formal style," which is not participative or interactive but mainly informative expressed in a linear, explicit and

elaborate manner. Finally the "frozen style" is placed on the highest level of formality, becoming the style of creativity, declamation and printed expression. These labels and general parameters on register variation proposed by Joos in the 60s are still useful in our current practice but they have not been revised, further developed and made applicable to specific contexts inside the whole spectrum of daily communication.

Despite the efforts of these authors and other specialists (Barber, 1962; Gregory, 1967) in favour of register analysis, at that time, the relevance of the research on social variation was shared –and often shaded– by that dedicated to other many social and dialectal varieties which were targeted by the most important linguists of those decades. In the mid-60s social situational variation was examined by Ferguson (1959, 1964), on diglossia and baby varieties respectively; Brown and Gilman (1960), on language and power; Leech (1966), on press advertising and poetry; Crystal and Davy (1969), on conversation, newspapers, legal and religious language; Gumperz and Hymes (1972), on argots in Asian villages; Labov (1972a), on urban and social dialects; and Trudgill (1974), on social differentiation of English; among many others. Most of these studies identified registers with styles (Labov, 1972a,b; Trudgill, 1974); with some rare exceptions such as Fisher (1958) who already distinguished three levels of formality in his interviews. According to Reppen et al. (2002), the factors attributed to this neglect of register research were, on the one hand, the fast development of descriptive functional linguistics and the prevailing status of spoken/conversational language (viewing the analyses of written varieties as targets of literary and rhetorical concern); and, on the other hand, "the discounting of the importance of register differences in a speech community, and the extent and social importance of the linguistic differences associated with those register ranges"; adding to these factors "the lack of a paradigmatic, or even dominant, methodological and theoretical framework for the analysis of registers" (Reppen et al., 2002: 6).

Nevertheless, register studies were not totally ignored and the term was often used in the studies carried out by some of the most important specialists of this period (Ferguson, 1964; Gumperz & Hymes, 1972; Labov, 1972a,b). However, from a practical point of view, the problem was that –as Benesh (2001: 5-6) mentions in her chronological review of EAP– most "register analysis" carried out in the 60s were lexical analyses on a specific topic or discipline such as "scientific English" or "Business English." She gives as an example, Ewer and Latorre's *Course in Basic Scientific English* (1969). These authors analysed three million words within the scope of modern scientific English ranging from popular writing to learned articles and graded the words according to frequency and complexity. From that study, pedagogical material appeared but, as it has been pointed out, all these materials were

about a "discipline" or a "topic" expressed in what might be called a "neutral or standard professional register." This register, however, became very helpful for the learning of specific vocabulary and grammatical structures related to a specific professional field but not for the distinguishing and learning of the register variation that operates in the communication related to that topic or field. For example, the process of water condensation and raining –"scientific English"– can be described to a group of university students sitting in a lecture theatre (institutional/academic register) but also to our own child lying in the garden (intimate register). The topic will be the same but the register in both cases might be quite different: in the first case, the speaker –the lecturer– will tend to use impersonal expressions, elaborate connectors, specific technical vocabulary, Latin terms, nominalizations and restricted body language; whereas in the second case, the speaker –the mother/father– might use attitudinal expressions, personalization, contractions or "fast" language, idiomatic expressions, figurative and metaphoric language, basic connectors and free body language; among many other choices.

In the 70s and 80s, specialists (Hymes, 1972; Gregory & Carroll, 1978; Halliday, 1978) concentrated on the limits of the concept of speech situation regarding those fields of linguistics highly dependant on its influence: speech acts, inference and presupposition, topic and comment, rhetorical devices such as metaphor, irony and allusion, etc. Together with all these new insights, more register studies emerged analysing the "register" of other specific disciplines, mainly professional, but most of them were still topic-centred lexical contributions. As Fowler (1996: 190) pointed out, the limitations among these "registers" were so confusing that it was very difficult to draw any classification. Despite this general tendency, three new important aspects were underscored with regard to register variation:

(a) the need to analyse register from a wider perspective which allowed embracing other language varieties and including other communicative parameters (Hymes, 1984; Martin, 1985);

(b) the importance of establishing some clearer set of differences between register analysis and genre analysis (Ventola 1984; Couture, 1986; Swales, 1990); and

(c) the key connection between register variation and the "verbal repertoire" of each language community: "no human being talks the same way all the time […]. At the very least, a variety of registers and styles is used and encountered; […] each language community has its own system of registers" (Ure, 1982: 5).

This theory clearly pointed out that registers should be considered verbal repertoires which depend on the specific language and community conventions (contextual, social and cultural conventions), not so much on individual conventions, clearly differentiating registers also from idiolects and communicative styles. Another essential contribution of these years in the distinction and classification of registers was the need to concentrate on the marked forms of each repertoire. All speakers have their own repertoires and know different ways of expressing the same information but, in a certain context, there is one which predominates over the others as the "marked form": "These marked forms of language constitute the registers of a linguistic repertoire" (Finegan & Besnier, 1989: 429). However, as McIntosh (1963) had warned 20 years earlier, these repertoires and marked forms depend on the social conventions and the perception of communicative suitability and appropriateness developed by the speech community.

Despite the relevance of these theoretical insights and their potential to develop diverse methodological approaches to register variation, the general practice still tended to identify register with topic/discipline, genre or style, always relating the notion of register to the scale of formality, and most of the specific register theory along this period evolved under the functional systemic approach to register variation led by Halliday (Halliday et al., 1964; Gregory & Carroll, 1978; Halliday, 1978, 1980) based on the three well-known parameters: "field" (topic or activities involved), "tenor" (participants' role relations) and "mode" (communication channels). They also established the correlation between each of these three components and the three main meta-functions of language in a social context: conceptual (field), interpersonal (tenor) and textual (mode) (Halliday, 1978). This perspective –highly theoretical– integrated and justified as register-related analyses the many previous studies on diverse disciplines (topic or field-centred analyses), and included within it the notion of register variation, not only the increasing studies on written and spoken communication, (mode) but also all those studies on variation related to role relationships (tenor), such as doctor-patient, teacher-pupil, vendor-customer, and so on (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Burton, 1980; Ventola, 1987; among many others). This wide ranging and all-embracing perspective of register led to the current situation in which either almost all can be included within register variation or hardly anything can really be attributed to register variation.

Obviously most of these studies on specific syntactic or grammatical features (e.g. passive voice), on functions (e.g. informing), on lexical characteristics (e.g. nominalizations) or on particular genres (e.g. letters and brochures) also offered subsequent insights into the use of register variation and contributed to obtaining a grasp of the magnitude of its coverage. However, this partial perspective does not

allow us to see how all the communicative aspects –syntax, functions, lexis, genres, etc.– vary together to move from one register to another, which constitutes the "keystone" to classifying registers and identifying repertoires. On the other hand, the studies on register variation from this systemic perspective offered some theoretical frameworks exemplified with linguistic and communicative features associated to a few differentiated registers –mainly professional registers (see Ghadessy, 1988)– but did not help to establish a practical clear division between registers and other close types of variation, these frameworks being very difficult to apply to all registers.

Probably the search for an alternative, a distinctive theory to analyze registers, was the initial purpose of Biber's work in the 80s. Biber (1986, 1988) and his colleagues started to develop a new "multidimensional" (MD) method of register analysis based on the four most important "dimensions" which differentiate the most frequently used registers:

> (a) involved versus informational production;
>
> (b) narrative versus non-narrative concern;
>
> (c) elaborated reference versus situation-dependent reference; and
>
> (d) impersonal versus non-impersonal style.

Coinciding with Crystal (1991), Biber and Finegan (1994) defined a register as a "linguistic difference that correlates with different occasions of use"; however, they added the following warning: "in addition to the term register, the terms genre, text type and style have been used to refer to language varieties associated with situational uses" (Biber & Finegan, 1994: 4). They distinguished these terms from the notion of dialect associated with groups of users, but not clearly amongst the four quoted terms themselves. This is why their work –despite the clarity of the title of the book (*Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Register*) and the high quality of the research included– contains several articles where there is no clear distinction between registers, genres and styles; finding expressions such as "the register of coaching," "Personal ads register" or "Diglossia as register variation," together with other articles mainly about styles. This mismatch in how a register may be considered with regard to other types of language usage keeps the sensation of certain confusion among the specialists themselves; a sensation which tends to increase dependant upon the specific set of heterogeneous dimensions proposed by the authors to study this variation: a mixture of functions (e.g. informational and narrative function) and linguistic features usually related to the user's style (e.g. impersonal style).

This unclear notion of register can be observed in many other works; for example, Schiffrin et al. (2001), *Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, which included very interesting

information about "register variation" in several chapters –mainly following Biber and Conrad's (2001) MD perspective– where the authors considered genres such as telephone conversations, face to face conversations, spontaneous speeches, public speeches, general fiction, professional letters, biographies, press reviews and official documents as registers. Something similar happened in Geisler (2002) regarding debates and trials.

Although the MD method is basically functional and based on the analysis of genres rather than registers, it is a highly valuable contribution to the study of registers, not only due to the amount of theory, suggestions, data and examples provided on language variation, but also to some insights into the distinctive nature of this specific type of variation. For example, Schiffrin et al. (2001: 191) specified that the main parameters that had an influence on the choice of a certain register were, on the one hand, the communicative purpose and the physical relationship between addressor and addressee, and on the other, the production circumstances and setting. In contrast with Halliday's (1978, 1980) theory, this notion does not include the mode and the field of communication as distinctive parameters in register variation, which brings the discussion back into the pioneer area of defining the basic parameters which intervene in the distinction of registers from other types of variation.

Differentiating register from other closely related linguistic concepts

This need to update and re-elaborate the foundations on register variation can be observed in contemporary authors such as Davies (2005). In his work on *Varieties of Modern English*, Davies analysed what he called "contextual variation" and, although he followed Halliday's theory about mode, tenor and field and exemplified this theory with some genres (cooking recipes and literary novels), his definition of register specified clearly the two main components of a register: the contextual situation and the roles of the participants. He started his approach by including as relevant aspects all the components of a speech situation listed by Hymes in 1972: setting, participants, ends, act, key, instrumentalities, norms and genre; but eventually he pointed out as distinctive two basic components: "register is a variety of language most likely to be used in a specific situation and with particular roles and statuses involved" (Hymes, 1972: 112).

Therefore, although many different components interact in all types of social variation at the same time, there is a distinctive correlation between them and the three main types of contextual variation (register, genre and style):

(a) the established norms or conventions of the setting and the roles of the participants decide the type of register to be used (for example, ceremonial or ritual register);

(b) inside that specific register, the participant's ends (purpose and function), the chosen instrumentalities (channels) and the act (sequence and form of expression) of the communicative event decide the type of genre (for example, a sermon); and, finally,

(c) the key (mood and manner) –among others– decide the type of style (for example, ironical).

Considering this telescopic dimension of the language variation Martin (1985) already observed that the language is expressed through registers and registers through genres; and following Martin, Carrillo Guerrero (2005: 25) also considered registers on a rhetorical level above all typologies of genres, texts or discourses, communicative codes and styles. He distinguished clearly registers from genres, as he exemplified through the text of the following postcard: "Here for a week with my sister. Been trying out my German. Lesley," (Carrillo Guerrero, 2005: 3). This author pointed out that this text belonged to the genre of post cards, but its linguistic peculiarities were determined by its register. The ellipsis of the personal pronoun "I," of the verbs "have been/have," of the heading "Dear, etc." and of the ending "Love, etc." correlated with an informal communicative situation of shared trust and knowledge between the interlocutors which differences it from other post cards of its same genre.

If we take as an example the macro-genre of spontaneous daily conversation and look at two different conversations: a conversation with our boss in his office (small meeting) and a conversation with our partner in bed (pillow talk). Regarding register, these two conversations will be very different and, as we see, the main variable will be the relationship between the interlocutors (their intentional and factual roles) and, as a secondary very important variable, the communicative setting (the norms, restrictions and appropriateness of where and when). Therefore, in practical terms these are the two basic variables which define the concept of register and on which extensive register analysis depends. Obviously, all the other variables interact at the same time and have an influence on the type of language produced. This is why, apart from this first basic differentiation of registers from genres (e.g. conversation, letter, report, novel, lecture. etc.) and styles (e.g. ironical, distant, elaborate, plain, etc.), on defining register variation other specifications are also crucial.

In the last ten years, several specialists approached the boundaries of the concepts of register, genre and style, and most of them seemed to agree on pointing out the

concept of "speech community" as the key parameter to understand and define these three levels of variation (Giménez Moreno, 1997). As mentioned at the beginning of the previous section, for almost a century the concept of "context" has been at the centre of many discussions on language variation (see Malinowski, 1923). In fact, there was a great amount of research about its different dimensions: cultural context, textual context, situational context, etc. (see Giglioli, 1972; Lakoff, 1972; van Dijk, 1977, 1999; Enkvist, 1984; Halliday & Hasan, 1985; among others). However, if we wish to delimit the coverage of current register variation using simple practical guidelines, the main parameter to distinguish among the different communicative contexts seems to be the mental model of each context that ordinary speakers –of the concerned speech community– have, and on which depends the set of communicative and behavioural choices they make. Obviously, not everybody has exactly the same mental model of each communicative context –the speaker's experiential and socio-cultural background will have an influence on these models– but there is a generic mental model attached to each context that most members recognize and share. These mental models also include all the sets of elements that accompany the specific marked linguistic choices: socio-cultural conventions regarding body language, proxemics, dress codes, etc. In fact, the shared mental models of each communicative context constitute one of the distinctive features of a speech community (Swales, 1990), and they are the starting point in the analysis and distinction between registers.

It is also essential to distinguish between "register" and "linguistic feature/characteristic" (e.g. personalisation, modality, etc.), "function" (e.g. show deference and politeness, inform, narrate, mitigate, persuade, etc.), "topic/field/discipline/subject" (e.g. the language of science, journalism, sports, economics, etc.) and "mode" (e.g. oral, written, sign language, etc.). The great difficulty in this subject is that in daily communication all these elements or components coming from language variation regarding its use, plus all the peculiarities introduced by the user's language variety, melt together so naturally that sometimes one specific linguistic feature (for example, "hereinafter") seems just distinctive of a certain set of language variables (the genre of the "memoranda of agreement" inside the discipline of "law" or "legal language" and mainly the written mode), leaving aside the fact that it can also be distinctive inside other wider or more neglected variables (such as the register of institutional or professional communication). In order to carry out these correlations in a systematic way we need some new insights, new typologies, new easier and more practical ways of recognising, classifying and studying registers.

Main difficulties in the classification of registers: a proposal

Taking into account the two mentioned basic components of register variation, a simple but useful typology might come out from the usual contexts of communication and the different communicative roles of daily life. The first basic division may be established between personal/private life and public life, and then subdivide them into at least another four basic registers which are shown in Table 1:

	Participants/Roles	Communicative Setting
Personal/Private life		
Family	Relatives	Family settings (homes and public places but exclusive/closed)
Amicable	Friends/Acquaintances	Friendly settings (homes and public places but exclusive/closed)
Public life		
Social	Neighbours/Citizens	Social open settings
Professional	Colleagues Social services: police, doctors, clerks, etc.	Institutions of public services and work environment.

Table 1. Basic register varieties.

In general terms, each of these basic registers may be expressed in –at least– three communicative versions, frequencies or tones:

(a) A more relaxed, flexible or informal register open to the mixture with other registers and to the introduction of diverse peculiarities arising from the specific circumstances or from the intervening language variation dependant on the users. In the case of private roles/settings the communication tends to enter into a more intimate dimension and in the case of public roles/settings the speakers will show a more casual attitude. It is preferable to avoid popular labels such as "colloquial" or "familiar" because they can be misleading or create certain interferences: the term "colloquial" is used to express a certain degree of flexibility, relaxation, routine or informality in the communicative register being used but it also conveys a certain shift towards the oral mode and the conversational genres which can create interferences when categorizing registers. The use of the adjective "familiar" may seem a good option to refer to family contexts for the common etymology of both words, even better when translating this approach into other languages; for example, in Spanish a "familiar register" could be easily understood as belonging to the family world ("*entorno familiar*"), but this word does not exist in English in the same meaning being generally used in the sense of "to be acquainted with."

(b) A neutral or conventional register recognised, shared and used by all the native speakers which shows most of the traditional parameters, matches with the expected stereotypes and provides the core amount of distinctive expressions.

(c) A distant, rigid or formal register highly stereotyped, accepted and traditional, the register of the "etiquette," the professional protocol, the daily rituals and social ceremonies.

The following tables (Tables 2, 3, 4 and 5) provide a few distinctive examples for each type of register and tone:

Family register	Internal variation
More informal/Intimate	• *Hi baby/sweetheart!* • *How's your day been, darling?* • *Come here and (give) us a kiss.* • *I could eat you up. You are so cute!*
Neutral/Conventional	• *I've got a sore on my arm. Where's that yellow cream?* • *That curry last night gave me awful stomach ache.* • *If you tell your mum that, you can forget your birthday present.*
More formal/Ritual	• *What have you been doing this weekend?* • *Have you been anywhere nice?* • *How do you feel today?*

Table 2. Family register: examples of internal variation.

Amicable register	Internal variation
More informal/Intimate	• *Hey mate, don't get so upset about it.* • *If he says that one more time, I'm going to shoot myself.* • *I feel like death warmed up today.* • *What can I wear to the party tomorrow to drive Peter wild?*
Neutral/Conventional	• *Helen and I are having a party over Easter. Would you and John like to come?* • *I've just given the baby some fruit. Let's hope that's the end of the tea-time tantrums.* • *I don't mind going, it's up to you.*
More formal/Ritual	• *How's Nick?* • *How's work going?* • *What are they (your kids) up to?*

Table 3. Amicable register: examples of internal variation.

Social register	Internal variation
More informal/Casual	• *My next door neighbour is absolutely filthy.* • *I can lend you my secateurs; just pop round after work and get them.* • *Don't eat there, it's a real rip-off.*
Neutral/Conventional	• *Excuse me! Would you mind helping me with this lock?* • *Pardon? I didn't quite catch what you said.* • *It's important to remember that we're here for a purpose.*
More formal/ Ritual/Ceremonial	• *We are here today to celebrate the marriage of …* • *I'd like to take this opportunity to thank my dear wife for…* • *It's been a great pleasure to welcome you into our home this evening.*

Table 4. Social register: examples of internal variation.

Professional register	Internal variation
More informal/Casual	• *Have you heard the latest about the MD? Apparently he's leaving!* • *What are you doing for lunch today? Feel like grabbing a sarnie?* • *Christ! That meeting went on for ages!*
Neutral/Conventional	• *I was wondering whether you might do me a favour.* • *The meeting will start at 10am.* • *Come in, sit down. What can I do for you?*
More formal/ Ritual/Ceremonial	• *My lords, ladies and gentlemen, I pray silence for …* • *Good evening and thanks for taking the time to attend this evening's event.* • *My dear colleagues, thank you and good night.*

Table 5. Professional register: examples of internal variation.

The complexity in the further analysis –detection of marked choices, sub-classification, description and extensive exemplification– of these basic registers mainly arises from three important facts:

(a) each register has its span of internal variation from its most flexible options to its most rigid ones, depending on the other coexisting communicative variables (mode, genre, style, etc.);

(b) registers evolve together with the socio-cultural parameters –habits/ traditions, needs, fashions, trends, etc.– of each speech community, so what might be usual for a group of speakers might be hardly acceptable for another group; and

(c) in daily communication speakers move across registers as fast as they move across communicative roles and contexts, so two interlocutors with the same communicative role –e.g. friends– will alter their communicative register depending on the different contexts where they are in each moment, and two interlocutors in the same context –e.g. an office– will alter their register depending on the roles they play.

Due to the first fact there are situations where a register at a certain point can share many features and become very similar to another one making it difficult to see which one is the predominant. As it can be perceived through the given examples, what seems obvious is that all registers tend to have a conventional/neutral version. Depending on the circumstances, they can be expressed in a more orthodox, rigid or formal manner (e.g. two relatives will tend to interact in a more distant tone if suddenly an acquaintance joins them while they are having a drink in the pub) and also in a more flexible, relaxed and personalised way with a tendency to include elements of other registers or to communicate through a mixture of registers (for example, two colleagues may end up in the pub behaving as "friends," then the initial register –"neutral professional register"– might become a mixture of "casual professional," "casual social" and "ritual or neutral amicable").

In many cases, this fluctuation will depend on the specific genre and the style chosen. For example, there are many genres (e.g. lectures, doctor-patient conversations, etc.) where the communication does not take place between two equal communicators with similar roles (e.g. two colleagues, two scholars, two doctors, two lawyers) but between the provider of a service (e.g. teacher, doctor, lawyer, receptionist.) and the consumer of the service who is "a member of the public/society" (e.g. student, patient, client, guest); in those cases the expected professional register might amalgamate with the social register to a larger or a smaller extent depending on the interlocutors' style, attitude and relationship. Something very similar happens in the world of mass communication: the language of journals contains a mixture of registers: from the expected specific professional jargon to any register used in the direct quotations and reported information included inside the articles of the journal. For example, while reporting a sudden incident in conventional "professional" English, a journalist of the *Daily Express* included the following quotation from a witness: "I got very, very upset and went outside the corridor and burst into tears" (*Daily Express* 4th June, 2005, p. 5), which belongs to an informal level of the "social," or even "amicable," register.

The correlation between genres and registers might become of great help in order to sub-classify these main registers but there are two issues that have to be taken into account. The first is that, as Swales (2004) points out, genres can no longer be seen as single and separable communicative entities but as complex networks which naturally switch mode from writing into speech and –it can also be added– move from a register variety into another. In fact, registers can be also seen in the same way, as complex networks which naturally move from one genre into another adapting themselves to the requirements of each genre. For example, linguistic features which are not frequent in formal professional registers –such as ellipsis, abbreviations and "fast language"– can be found in some formal academic genres; for example, in scientific abstracts subjectless sentences (e.g. "Examined J. P.'s early writings …") often appear at the beginning or inside the text mainly to economize on space. The second issue is that, regarding genre variation, there is still an imbalance in the research dedicated to the diverse communicative settings: genre analysts have tended to concentrate much more in written than in oral genres and also in public rather than in private communication so it is much easier to find helpful studies and already accepted genres related to social and professional registers than to the registers used in family and amicable contexts. As Swales (2004: 1) notes, from the late 1980s to the first years of the new millennium, "there has been a continuing and accelerating interest in centralizing the concept of genre in specialized language teaching and in the development of professional communication skills." It is also important to

consider that by the mere nature of each mode, spoken genres tend to be more adaptable to internal register variation than written genres, the latter being more faithful to the conventional/neutral parameters of each register.

Nevertheless, these challenging –more than hindering– aspects should not discourage new practical approaches based on the correlations between registers and genres. As the following table (Table 6) shows, correlations between the main registers and some of the most usual spoken genres can be easily established and they can be one of the most illustrative and useful parameters to create practical classifications and illustrative exemplifications.

Registers	Tones/Frequencies	Spoken Genres
Family	Intimate	Pillow talk
	Neutral	Daily meal talk
	Ritual	Christmas dinner, and other family celebrations
Amicable	Intimate	Confessions, and "have a laugh" talk
	Neutral	Dinner party talk
	Ritual	Open gathering, and street encounter with acquaintances
Social	Casual	Warning, requests and street/lift encounters with neighbours
	Neutral	Social open assembly (with diverse neighbours and other citizens)
	Ceremonial	Religious ceremonies (with all sorts of members)
Professional	Casual	Coffee break
	Neutral	Business meeting
	Ceremonial	Awards ceremony

Table 6. Correlation between registers and spoken genres.

As mentioned, another important obstacle in order to approach register analysis is the current socio-cultural diversity found in most communicative settings. Just by standing in the middle of a city square and listening to how people address to each other around us, we can observe how the complexity of current socio-cultural values has a great effect on the complexity of current communication. The cohabitation of so many different social, cultural, moral, professional and personal parameters in our day-to-day communicative settings is promoting, on the one hand, a general tendency to the relaxation and the neutralization of the traditional forms of communication; and on the other hand, the acceptance of new communicative options which facilitate and increase the effectiveness, the understanding and/or integration of the speakers. These two sociolinguistic processes have a great effect on register variation and register analysis since there is a wider diversity of roles and settings at the four levels –familiar, amicable, social and professional– and they seem to evolve and introduce new changes with increasing rapidity. These adjustment processes not only bring modifications inside a register but also alter other language varieties creating hybrids and new registers ("emergent registers," according to Ferrara et al., 1991: 12): "it appears that competent users of a language have an extended language repertoire,

and when new situations arise, they create new appropriate language varieties out of existing language varieties: they form hybrids."

Finally, the last issue to consider when analysing registers lies in the rhythm of daily communication. In many personal, social and professional situations there are occasions when in a short span of time a speaker is continuously moving between different registers depending on the communicative context starting or ending, and also on the type of relationship maintained with the interlocutors approaching and leaving that context. An example of how this fact becomes determining in the delimitation of the different registers and in the classification of their distinctive features can be the communicative complexity of academic conferences. As Swales (2004: 197) points out talking about conference presentations:

> This would involve the travel to and from the venue, the meeting of old friends and the making of new acquaintances, the plenaries, receptions, and book exhibits, and the intangibles of the conference "buzz" –its taut intellectual atmosphere, its rush from one talk to another, its gossip, its job interviews, its hot topics, and its "in" people.

Obviously, in one of these big communicative events many registers, genres, styles and roles take part. The usual and expected communicative tone or frequency used among all the members of this main event –academic conference– belongs to what might be called "institutional or professional" register (the context is institutional/professional and the roles of the participants are colleague-colleague), and more specifically, inside this broad professional register, to the "academic" register (the context is the university world). This register is the parameter which embraces most of the language varieties taking place in the conference and will be clearly perceived by the participants not only in genres such as the plenaries where the register shows its most formal distinctive features, but also in other more casual genres, such as the genre of the coffee breaks, the receptions and the "journeys" (lifts to airports, stations, restaurants and other buildings). In the case of plenaries, the speaker may switch from the "neutral academic" flow of speech into a most "ritual or ceremonial" register; and in the case of the coffee break, s/he will switch into one of the different options of "social" register, or even of "amicable" register. However, there may be times when the speaker finishes the presentation –having used a "neutral or ritual" register– then walks outside the conference theatre with the colleague who introduced him/her –talking in a "casual professional" register– and then is intercepted by an old colleague –switching with him/her into a "ritual," o perhaps "neutral," "amicable" register– and the three of them end up in the coffee shop joining another group of colleagues –talking together in a mixture of "casual academic" register and "neutral," or perhaps "ritual," "social" one. All this process

can happen in minutes and an effective speaker has to be prepared to be effective throughout these swift shifts of register.

Regarding the distinction of registers from other varieties, the interesting aspect is that in all these situations most speakers –mainly native or proficient speakers of English– will perceive clearly that the different communicative frequencies or tones available are being used and manipulated in order to emphasize or negotiate the roles/relationships and the contexts implicated in that speech act, independently of the genre being used. For example, if we are giving a colleague a lift to the hotel at the end of the day's activities and this colleague opens the door of the car, sits down next to us and says "Right, so do you agree with Peter about the irrelevance of the theory. Do we know any of the members of the advisory board?" seems quite clear that he/she is maintaining the "academic" tone of the interaction; but if he/she says "Thank you for the lift. You can't find a taxi round here for love nor money. And then on top of that they're so expensive." This implies that our colleague is opening a conversation in a "social" register; however, if we hear "Wow! Great day, don't you think! Shall we have one last drink before bed?" he/she is starting an interaction in an "amicable" or friendly register.

With the help of the existing –and also new corpora– further research is being currently carried out at the University of Valencia to adapt and develop this approach –only just outlined here– and analyse the feasibility of this framework regarding the exemplification of each register and its use for communicative and pedagogical purposes. Regarding register typologies, the most important challenge is to integrate the categories, concepts, examples and valuable contributions inherited from our predecessors into a new practical and effective systemic method of analysis which sets this type of language variation at the same level of importance as the other related language varieties and promotes a deeper study of its current use across all daily communicative contexts.

Conclusions

There is a need to re-define the notion of register and to approach register variation in a wider, deeper and more useful manner which covers all its span of internal change. As emphasized in the introduction of the present paper, the study and the effective use of registers depends on the identification of their specific position inside the chain of language choices made in daily communication. At the moment this position still seems quite ambiguous, unclear and restricted in practice to a few general parameters, such as formality/informality. Through these pages, the search

for this "missing link" –the distinctive nature, wide coverage and use of registers– has been approached by reviewing the most significant previous studies on register variation and discussing the basic differentiations between registers and other closely related linguistic concepts. Finally, to provide a ground to encourage discussion, a new perspective of analysing and classifying current registers has been outlined.

At present, perhaps none of us can offer a better definition or a more useful typology of registers than those already proposed but if the community of linguists start revising and discussing this field and contributing with new positive ideas, perhaps soon this term might not be so frequently confused with other language varieties and specialists might find a more effective way of describing, classifying, exemplifying and –what is even more urgent– creating effective materials for teaching register variation.

Register variation is possibly one of the most subtle, compromising and effective types of variation inside the world of professional and social communication; however, it is one of the most difficult to be perceived, learnt and correctly used by foreign speakers and, in general, all non-effective communicators. Some current popular debates and conflictive matters on linguistic and communicative issues –such as those brought up by members of the audience in British radio programmes, such as *Word for Word* (Radio 4)– might be better understood and solved much more easily if British ordinary speakers knew more information about their own register variation; for example, certain speakers might not need to hide their accent or feel stigmatised professionally or socially due to where they come from if they could learn to master the necessary registers needed to speak correctly and effectively in institutional, professional and social settings across the UK.

Despite this demand, there is a surprising scarcity of teaching materials on this type of variation. As Barnickel (1982) pointed out in her study on how to improve the teaching of travel agency encounters,

> although current textbooks include some training on choices of modality, politeness markers and formality, recordings of authentic discourse in travel agencies show that foreign language teaching is still rather off the mark, and that more research in this area is still needed. (Barnickel, 1982: 499)

From the pedagogical point of view, it is obvious that the research carried out so far about register variation has not been as successful and profitable as that on dialectal variation (i.e. "World Englishes") or genre variation (e.g. the language of letter writing). Most specialised current textbooks include exercises on these latter types of variation but not much about register variation; apart from the typical exercises about basic general formal-informal aspects of communication: direct versus indirect style,

active versus passive expressions, "fast language" versus nominalizations, etc.

As this article emphasises, for many linguistic, social and pedagogical reasons this field of variation needs urgent research capable of leading to more practical distinctions, to deeper understanding, to more innovative pedagogical approaches and to more effective teaching materials.

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