

Sociolinguistics: Style, context and register, speech functions, politeness, Cross-cultural communication, culture and meaning

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Style, context and register

Example 1:

Three different requests for information”

1. From a friend “Where have you been? I’ve rang you several times so far and I only listen to your RBT”
2. In the meeting from one of the board member “Could you give the exact information where did you go and bring the order on the twelfth of June?”
3. From a teacher to her pupils in school on the day after Halloween. “I know some of you went ‘trick or treating’ last night and so I thought we might talk a bit today about how you got on. Did you go out last night Jimmy?”

Each of those three sentences or utterances the speakers are trying to get the same information from the addressee, but the context influences the form of those questions. Each request for information is expressed quite differently. Hence it can be said that language varies according to its uses as well as according to who is using it. The addressees and the context affect our choice of code or variety, whether language, dialect or *style*.

The term style refers to variation in a person’s speech or writing. Style usually varies from casual to formal according to the type of situation, the person or persons addressed, the location, the topic discussed, etc. A particular style, e.g. a formal style or a colloquial style, is sometimes referred to as a stylistic variety. However, some linguists use the term ‘register’ for a stylistic variety whilst others differentiate between the two.

Style can also refer to a particular person’s use of speech or writing at all times or to a way of speaking or writing at a particular period of time, e.g. Dickens’ style, the style of Shakespeare, an 18th- century style of writing.

A speech variety used by a particular group of people, usually sharing the same occupation (e.g doctors, lawyers) or the same interest (e.g stamp collectors, baseball fans, etc) A particular register often distinguishes itself from other registers by having a number of distinctive words, by using words or phrases in a particular way (e.g. in tennis: *deuce, love, tramlines*), and sometimes by special grammatical constructions (e.g. legal language). As Wardhaugh states (1988, 48-9) *register* is another complicating factor in any study of language varieties. Registers are sets of vocabulary items associated with discrete—having a clear independent shape or form; separate—occupational or social groups. Surgeons, airline pilots, bank managers, sales clerk, jazz fans, and pimps use different vocabularies. Of course, one may control a variety registers: you can be a stockbroker and an archeologist, or a mountain climber and an economist.

Dialect, style, and register differences are largely independent: you can talk casually about mountain climbing in a local variety of a language, or you can write a formal technical study of wine making. You may also be judged to speak ‘better’ or ‘worse’ than other speakers who have much the same background. It is quite usual to find some people who are acknowledged to speak a language or one of its varieties better or worse than others.

Speech functions

This term could be referred to functions of language—also language functions. Language is often described as having three main functions: descriptive, expressive, and social. The descriptive function of language is to convey or express factual information. This is the type of information which can be stated or denied and in some cases even tested, for example:

It must be well below ten degrees outside

The expressive function of language is to give information about the speaker, his or her feelings, preferences, prejudices, and past experiences. Another example could be described in the utterance below:

I’m not inviting the Sandersons again

This may, with appropriate intonation, show that the speaker did not like the family and that this is the reason not to invite them again. The social function of language serves to establish and maintain social relations between people. For example, the utterance:

Such a lovely day isn’t it?

This could be used to signal a friend or an acquaintance—a person you just know—in order to start a conversation among the participants or could be described as a role of maintaining good communication and relationship purposes.

Example 2: (taken from Intro to Sociolinguistics by Holmes)

Boss : Good morning Sue. Lovely day.

Secretary : Yes, it's beautiful. Makes you wonder what we're doing here doesn't it.

Boss : Mm, that's right. Look I wonder if you could possibly get sort this lot out by ten. I need them for a meeting.

Secretary : Yes sure. No problem.

Boss : Thanks that's great.

This dialogue is typical of many everyday interactions in that it serves both an affective (or social) function, and a referential (or informative) function. The initial greetings and comments on the weather serve a social function; they establish contact between the two participants. The exchange then moves on to become more information-oriented or referential in function. According to Holmes (2001: 259) there are number of ways to categorize the functions of speech as follows:

1. Expressive utterances express the speaker's feeling, e.g. *I'm feeling great today*
2. Directive utterances attempt to get someone to do something, e.g. *Clear the table, pick up the phone*
3. Referential utterances provide information, e.g. *At the third store it will be three o'clock precisely*
4. Metalinguistic utterances comment on language itself, e.g. *Hegemony is not a common word*
5. Poetic utterances focus on aesthetic features of language, e.g. a poem, an ear-catching motto, a rhyme, like: *Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.*
6. Phatic utterances express solidarity and empathy with others, e.g. *Hi, how's life treating you, lovely day isn't it?*

The British linguist, Halliday, considers language as having three main functions: the ideational function is to organize the speaker's or writer's experience of the real or imaginary world, i.e. language refers to real or imagined persons, things, actions, events, states, etc. Another can function as the interpersonal that is to indicate, establish, or maintain social relationship between people. It includes forms of address, modality or mood, etc; while for the textual is to function or create written or spoken texts which cohere within themselves and which fit the particular situation in which they are used.

Example 3:

Teacher : What are you doing over by the window Helen?

Helen : Looking at the birds Miss

Teacher : And what should you be doing?

Helen : (No answer and perhaps thinking about what she should be doing)

Teacher : Go back to your seat now and get on with your writing. (what is the function of this utterances?)

Directives are concerned with getting people to do things. The speech acts which express directive force vary in strength. We can attempt to get people to sit down, for instance, by suggesting or inviting them to do so, or by ordering or commanding them to sit down. Orders and commands are speech acts which are generally expressed in imperative form. Polite attempts to get people to do something tend to use interrogatives or declaratives, as the following examples illustrate:

Sit down	imperative
You sit down.	<i>You</i> , imperative
Could you sit down?	Interrogative with modal verb
Sit down, will you?	Interrogative with tag
Won't you sit down?	Interrogative with negative modal
I want you to sit down	declarative
I'd like you to sit down	declarative
You'd be more comfortable sitting down	declarative

The list could go on and on. There are many ways of expressing directive. And although it can be said that in general the interrogatives and declaratives are more polite than the imperatives, a great deal depends on intonation, tone of voice and context. A gentle sit down may be far more polite than a thundered I want you to sit down. In a shop, utterances in the example below will be considered normal, while the other one would be well regarded as sarcastic.

Example 4:

(a) 10 kilogram of rice

(b) Could you possibly give me 10 kilo of rice?

Politeness

This term can be stated as how it—language—expresses the social distance between speakers and their different role relationship; how face-work, that is, the positive image or impression of oneself that one shows or intends to

show the other impression of oneself, the attempt to establish, maintain, and save face during conversation. It is carried out in a speech community. Languages differ in how they express politeness. In English phrases like: *I wonder if I could...* can be used to make a request more polite. In other languages the same effect can be expressed by a word or particle.

Politeness markers include differences between formal. Speech and colloquial, speech, and the use of address form. In expressing politeness, the anthropologists, Brown and Levinson distinguished between positive polite strategies (those which show the closeness, intimacy, and rapport between speaker and hearer) and negative politeness strategies (those which indicate the social distance between speaker and hearer). As Wardhaugh (1988: 267-8) explains that some languages seem to have built into very complex systems of politeness. Javanese, one of the principal languages of Indonesia, is a language in which, as Geertz (1960, p. 248) says ‘it is nearly impossible to say anything without indicating the social relationships between the speaker and the listener in terms of status and familiarity.’ Before one Javanese speaks to another, he or she must decide on an appropriate speech style (*styleme*, in Geertz’s terminology): high, middle, or low. Such decision is necessary due to the fact that for many words there are three distinct variants according to style. For example, the equivalent to the English word *now* is *samenika* in high style, *saniki* in middle style, and *saiki* for low style. One cannot freely shift styles, so the choice of *saiki* will require the speaker to use *arep* for the verb equivalent to go rather than *adjeng* or *bade*, which would be required by the choices of *saniki* and *samenika*, respectively.

But there is still another level of complication. Javanese has a set of honorifics, referring to such matters as people, body parts, possessions, and human actions. These honorifics can be used to further modulate two of the style levels, the high and the low. There are both high honorifics, e.g. *dahar* for *eat*, and low honorifics, e.g., *neda* for *eat*. Only high honorifics can accompany high style, but both high and low honorifics can accompany low style. We can also use the equivalent of English *eat* to show a further complication. *Neda* is found in the high style with no honorifics, the middle style (which cannot have honorifics), and the low style with low honorifics. *Dahar* for *eat* always signals high honorifics in either high or low style. In low style without honorifics *eat* is *mangan*. We can see the various combinations that are possible if we combine the various equivalents of *eat* and *now* as in the table 1.1. In addition, table 1.2 shows the equivalent of the English sentence, ‘Are you going to eat rice and cassava now?’ in the six levels that are possible in Javanese.

Table 1.1. Levels in Javanese

Speech level		Example	
		eat	now
3a	High style, high honorifics	dahar	samenika
3	High style, no honorifics	neda	Samenika
2	Middle style, no honorifics	neda	Saniki
1b	Low style, high honorifics	dahar	Saiki
1a	Low style, low honorifics	neda	Saiki
1	Low style, no honorifics	mangan	saiki

Level names: 3a krama inggil (high style, high honorifics)

3 krama biasa (high style, no honorifics)

2 krama madya (middle style, no honorifics)

1b ngoko sae (low style, high honorifics)

1a ngoko madya (low style, low honorifics)

1 ngoko biasa (low style, no honorifics)

Source: Geertz (1960) (in Wardhaugh, 1988: 268)

Table 1.2. Level differences in Javanese sentence

	Are	you	going	to eat	rice	and	casava	now?
3a	menapa	pandjenengan	bade	dahar	sekul	kalijan	kaspe	samenika
3	menapa	sampejan	bade	neda	sekul	lan	kaspe	samenika
2	napa	sampejan	adjeng	neda	sekul	lan	kaspe	saniki
1b	apa	pandjenengan	arep	dahar	sega	lan	kaspe	saiki
1a	apa	sampejan	arep	neda	sega	lan	kaspe	saiki
1	apa	kowe	arep	mangan	sega	lan	kaspe	saiki

Source: Geertz (1960, p.250) (in Wardhaugh, 1988: 268)

Geertz adds a further interesting observation: as one moves from low to high style, one speaks more slowly and softly and more evenly in terms of rhythm and pitch, so that the highest level, ‘when spoken correctly, have a kind of stately pomp which can make the simplest conversation seem like a great ceremony.’ (Geertz, 1960:173)

It is not at all easy to specify when a particular level is used. As Geertz says (p- 257-8) (as also taken from Wardhaugh, 1988: 268-9)

A thorough semantic study of the contexts within which the different levels are employed would in itself be a complex and extended investigation, for the number of variables specifically determining the selection of a particular level are very numerous. They include not only qualitative characteristics of the speakers—age, sex, kinship relation, occupation, wealth, education, religious commitment, family background—but also more general factors such as: the social setting (one would be likely to use higher level to the same individual at a wedding than in the street); the content of the conversation (in general, one uses lower levels when speaking of commercial matters, higher one if speaking of religious or aesthetic matters); the history of social interaction between speakers (one will tend to speak rather high, if one speaks at all, with someone with whom one has quarreled); the presence of a third person (one tends to speak higher to the same individual idiosyncratic—strange or unusual—attitudes. Some people particularly, it seems, wealthier traders and self-confident village chiefs, who tend to think the whole business rather uncomfortable and somewhat silly, speak *ngoko* to almost everyone except the very high in status. Others will shift levels on any pretext. A complete listing of the determinants of level selection would, therefore, involve a thorough analysis of the whole framework of Javanese culture.

However, it is possible to state a few principles that seem to operate. Highest style is used among the old aristocrats or by anyone at the highest levels of society who wants to give the appearance of elegance. Middle style is used by town-dwellers who are not close friends, or by peasants addressing superiors since they cannot be expected to have any knowledge of high style. Low level is the style all children learn first regardless of social class origin, and everyone uses it on some occasion, even close acquaintances of the highest classes. It is also used to clear inferiors, e.g., by high government officials to peasants and perhaps even to town people. Low honorifics added to low style indicate a lack of intimacy and mark a certain social distance but not much. It is mainly the aristocracy who use the low level with high honorifics but town people might use it too; such use seems to indicate a need to express both intimacy through the use of the low style and respect through the use of the honorifics, a kind of compromise solution.

Geertz's caveat—a warning to consider something before acting further, or a statement which limits a more general statement—still applies: there are many personal and local variations so that the total system is extremely complex and the possibilities for making wrong choices abound. As Java has modernized, certain things have changed there. One important change that has been the spread of the national language, Bahasa Indonesia, a more 'democratic' language. Bahasa Indonesia already dominates the political life of Java because it enables you to talk about issues without having to choose a particular level of speech which necessarily conveys attitudes you might not want to convey. However, there is no reason to assume that Javanese itself will change and that the various levels will disappear. Rather, the spread of Bahasa Indonesia in Java may best be seen as offering a choice to those who know both Javanese and Bahasa Indonesia. As Geertz says (p.259), Bahasa Indonesia 'seems destined, at least in the short run, to become part of the general Javanese linguistic system, to become one more type of sentence among those available, to be selected for use in certain special context and for certain special purposes.'

Cross-cultural communication, culture and meaning

An exchange of ideas, information, etc. between person from different cultural backgrounds. There are often more problems in cross-cultural communication than in communication between people of the same cultural background. Each participant may interpret the other's speech according to his or her own cultural conventions and expectations. If the cultural conventions of the speakers are widely different, misinterpretations and misunderstandings can easily arise, even resulting in a total breakdown of communication. This has been shown by research into real-life situations, such as job interviews, doctor-patient encounters and legal communication.

Before it is discussed further, let us take account into culture and meaning. As it has been stated by Thompson (2003: 109) culture is the second of the three levels of social reality that has been indicated to be particularly important. What makes culture so important and so interesting is that it is socially constructed. It can be said that culture is a set of shared meanings, assumptions and understandings which have developed historically in a given community (a geographical community or community of interest—for example, a professional community). Cultures are not genetically transmitted from one generation to the next. They exist only through the fact that they are communicated. As a result, culture is manifested in a day-to-day interaction that also affects the behavior of people. This is closely related to the idea of discourse—that is, according to Foucault (in Thompson, *ibid*)—a set of meanings and practices which not only reflect reality but constitute that reality:

...the term 'discourse' to refer to the way in which language and other forms of communication act as the vehicle of social processes. For example, medical discourse not only reflects the power of the medical profession but actively contributes to constructing, re-enacting or re-making and thus perpetuating or maintaining such power.

The meaning itself is interpreted within the cultural envelope created by the discourse system from which a person speaks. (Scollon and Scollon, 2001:241) (in Thompson, *ibid*). Hence, culture and meaning are intertwined as a result of the total set of beliefs, attitudes, customs, behavior, etc. social habits of the members of a particular

society that results in expressing about the world we live in. This is in line with what Rosengreen (2000) in (Thompson, 2003: 110) states that culture as a reservoir of meaning.

...human societal culture is a great reservoir of meaning, which is constantly being drawn upon when human beings communicate and interact—within generations and between generations. This reservoir of meaning defines an important difference between animal and human communication. A defining feature of human culture is that it is as if it should exist also between human brains. Culture lives when meaningfully communicated.

Culture, is clearly a very powerful factor when it comes to communication, since it provides this reservoir of meaning from which making sense of day-to-day communicative interactions. It plays an important role in shaping human thinking and behavior that leads to contributing social life. As Holmes (2001: 337) suggests that language, thought—human thinking—and culture interrelate. Most sociolinguists agree that language influences our perceptions of ‘reality’. These are triggered by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that people from different cultures think differently because of their languages. Language provides a means of encoding a community’s knowledge, beliefs, and values and that is culture. For example (Holmes, 2001: 329-30) Tahitians do not make a distinction between ‘sadness’ and ‘sickness’, for instance, using the same word for both. This reflects their belief that ‘sadness/sickness’ can be attributed to an attack by evil spirits, a belief that may initially seem odd to someone from Western culture. However, Western medical practice now recognizes depression as an illness, and English uses many metaphorical terms for depression which no doubt appear just as strange to those from other cultures, e.g. *feeling blue, in low spirits, feeling down, under the weather*, and so on.

There is also undisputed evidence, (Holmes, 2001: 337) however, that the physical and cultural environment in which it develops and influences the vocabulary and grammar of a language. Languages develop the vocabulary their speakers need, for instance, whether to label different kinds of kangaroo—in Australia, where this animal comes from, or to identify different ways of cooking rice—just like in Javanese. When cultural and social change occur the linguistic system generally adapts. As a result, language is a valuable source of insight into the perceptions, values, beliefs and attitudes of a community. What can be meant from this is that, while our day-to-day actions and interactions contribute towards maintaining and reproducing cultural norms and assumptions and so on, our actions and interactions are also largely constrained and/or shaped by the cultural context in which they occur. If culture helps us to make sense of the world we live in, then clearly it is a very powerful influence in shaping our thinking and behavior.

Culture therefore plays an important role in maintaining social order as it is a fundamental part of social life. When we consider that language can be seen as the basis of culture (Guirdham, 1999 in Thompson, 2003: 110) then it can be seen that language also plays a role in contributing to the social order. Indeed, this is highly consistent with Foucault’s notion of discourse and its role in regulating society. It is therefore needs to recognize that we see culture as a set of shared meanings, assumptions and norms. We are thereby attributing an extremely important role to culture in terms of both the macro level of the social order and the micro level of day-to-day communicative interactions.

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