

Register and Style

In linguistics, a register is a variety of a language used for a particular purpose or in a particular social setting. For example, when speaking in a formal setting contrary to an informal setting, an English speaker may be more likely to use features of the prescribed grammar – such as pronouncing words ending in ‘-ing’ with a velar nasal instead of an alveolar nasal (e.g. ‘walking’, not ‘walkin’), choosing more formal words (e.g. ‘father’ rather than ‘dad’, or ‘child’ rather than ‘kid’, etc.), and refraining from using words considered non-standard, such as ‘ain’t’.

The term ‘register’ was first used by the linguist Thomas Bertram Reid in 1956, and brought into general currency in the 1960s by a group of linguists who wanted to distinguish among variations in language according to the. The focus is on the way language is used in particular situations, such as legalese or motherese, the language of a biology research lab, of a news report, or of the bedroom.

As with other types of language variation, there tends to be a spectrum of registers rather than a discrete set of obviously distinct varieties. Numerous registers could be identified, with no clear boundaries between them. Discourse categorisation is a complex problem, and even in the general definition of ‘register’ given above, there are cases where other kinds of language variation, such as regional or age dialect, overlap. Owing to this complexity, scholarly consensus has not been reached for the definitions of terms including ‘register’, ‘field’ or ‘tenor’. Different scholars’ definitions of these terms are often in direct contradiction of each other. Some scholars prefer to restrict the domain of the term ‘register’ to a specific vocabulary, while others argue against the use of the term altogether.

The term ‘style’ is also sometimes used to refer to situational variation. However, it includes variation in grammatical structures, too. It is less predictable and more dependent on personal preferences than register. There is a terminological distinction between register and style. Both are associated with a specific speech situation, but whereas register often refers to the specific vocabulary chosen and expected in connection with a particular speech situation, style includes grammatical variation as well.