TECHNICAL REPORT

ISO/TR 20694

A typology of language registers

Une typologie des registres de langues

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ISO/TR 20694:2018
https://standards.iteh.ai/catalog/standards/sist/a79e47d9-1565-4793-89f4-
d73139235d31/iso-tr-20694-2018

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Foreword

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This document was prepared by Technical Committee ISO/TC 37, *Language and terminology*, Subcommittee SC 1, *Principles and methods*.

Introduction

This document aims to clarify ambiguities arising from the use of the term 'register' to designate different concepts. It aims to examine different conceptualizations of language registers amongst linguistic theorists so that useful definitions can be agreed on for use in, for example, standardization work. It also aims to contribute to developing new means of providing comprehensive coverage of language variants.

Computational management of language resources requires appropriate descriptors and tags for different language varieties.

A typology of language registers will aid appropriate communication in business and commerce, for example where a marketing campaign needs to address consumers in a friendly, informal register, or in medicine where there is a need to understand clearly the difference between technical communication between professionals on the one hand, and clear and simple communication for public health campaigns on the other.

There is as yet no common agreement on terms and concepts for individual language registers, or way to map their relationship to each other.

As dialects can have a geographic designation, language registers can be designated by their linguistic patterns, both lexico-grammatical and discoursal-semantic patterns associated with situations.

A description of a language register needs to state whether it is a written or a spoken register, or expressed by some other modality. It is therefore multifaceted, and polyhierarchical, fitting in with existing ISO standards such as ISO 24620-1 and ISO 639 in order to attain maximum impact. It lays the groundwork for developing codes for language registers at a future date. This document proposes an overview of all relevant language registers and does not intend to create standards for each individual register. It will, however, help to identify and inform further areas for elaboration.

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A typology of language registers

1 Scope

This document gives the general principles for language registers in both descriptive and prescriptive environments. It defines key concepts and describes examples of different language registers that can be applied across all or many languages and those that are language-specific. It lays down guidelines for the use of appropriate language registers needed in a wide range of environments. These include:

— terminology work, where it contributes to the development of a wide range of standards;

— translation, so that appropriate language levels can be chosen in target languages, to match that of the source language;

— lexicography, to improve descriptors of non-geographic language variants;

— second language teaching and learning, so that students can avoid pitfalls associated with inappropriate language use;

— software, to improve tagging of language variants in computer applications.

2 Normative references

There are no normative references in this document.

3 Terms and definitions

For the purposes of this document, the following terms and definitions apply.

3.1
language variety
largest subset of an individual language that is homogeneous both with regard to a certain criterion for linguistic variation and with regard to a certain structural criterion for linguistic variation

3.2
code switching
changing backwards and forwards between two or more languages or language varieties in conversation

3.3
language register
language variety (3.1) used for a particular purpose or in an event of language use, depending on the type of situation, especially its degree of formality

Note 1 to entry: An individual usually has more than one language register in their verbal repertoire and can vary their use of register according to their perception of what is appropriate for different purposes or domains.

3.4
common register
language register (3.3) used in addressing or referring to non-royal persons

3.5
royal register
language register (3.3) used in addressing or referring to royal persons

3.6
formal register
language register (3.3) that conforms to accepted standards and conventions and is used in serious and official situations

3.7
informal register
language register (3.3) that does not pay special attention to standards and conventions and is used in casual and familiar situations

3.8
high register
formal register (3.6) conceived of as being at the top of a vertical continuum of *language registers* (3.3)

3.9
low register
informal register (3.7) conceived of as being at the bottom of a vertical continuum of *language registers* (3.3)

3.10
slang register
extremely *informal register* (3.7) of a word, term, or text that is used in spoken and everyday language and less commonly in documents

EXAMPLE   In aviation, the phrase *fly by the seat of your pants* is slang for the more formal *fly without instruments*.

3.11
facetious register
language register (3.3) related to an expression that is intended to be clever and funny but that is really silly and annoying

3.12
legal register
language register (3.3) used in the domain of law

3.13
literary register
language register (3.3) commonly used in literary works

3.14
neutral register
standard register
language register (3.3) appropriate to general texts or discourse

3.15
simplified language
prescriptive *language register* (3.3) following guidelines to make text and/or speech easier to understand

3.16
technical register
language register (3.3) appropriate to scientific texts or special languages

3.17
vulgar register
language register (3.3) of a term or text type that can be characterized as profane or socially unacceptable

3.18
in-house register
language register ([3.3](#)) that is company-specific and not readily recognized outside this environment

Note 1 to entry: In-house terminology is not necessarily equivalent to bench-level terminology, inasmuch as the former can thrive at very high levels of research and development. In-house terminology is frequently the source of new technical terminology that eventually gains widespread acceptance on a broader scale.

3.19
bench-level register
shop term
register of terms used in applications-oriented as opposed to theoretical or academic levels of language

3.20
subregister
subsidiary division of *language register* ([3.3](#))

3.21
honorific
word, title, or grammatical form that signals respect or high social status

3.22
motherese
baby talk
language register ([3.3](#)) often used by adults in addressing very small children

4   General principles

4.1   Ability to vary and use language registers appropriately

Language registers are varieties of language where one person can have more than one type of language at their command, sometimes called their 'verbal repertoire'. Individuals are often able to vary their register according to different circumstances or environments which can depend on social attitudes, as well as geographic issues, which are covered by dialect and accent. Use of different language registers can be prescribed and proscribed for some environments, either through education and conformity to social norms, or, increasingly, through adherence to guidelines in various professional settings such as translation or publishing environments.

No individual has a perfect grasp of all possible language registers used in their language community. However, an individual's ability to understand a wide variety of registers and their social significance is greater than their ability to use, speak or write in these registers. Some higher registers are formal markers of learned environments, and lack of mastery of these registers is therefore taken as an indicator of a lack of education. Individuals from deprived backgrounds are sometimes characterized as having less mastery of different language registers, with this holding back their prospects of well-paid jobs. Thus, the active teaching of different language registers and the appropriate context for their use, is sometimes advocated.

The understanding and appropriate use of different language registers is also important in second language teaching, where errors of register mark students out as not being proficient even where their accent, vocabulary and grammar are exemplary. Understanding of register is also important in translation work, where the translator needs to translate into a similar register unless instructed otherwise. Different language registers also need to be kept separate in translation memories, otherwise texts of mixed language registers can result, leading to incongruity and lack of consistency.

4.2   Language registers and non-linguistic signals

The use of different language registers can be accompanied by the use of other non-linguistic signals, such as different gestures, dress, or even seating arrangements. Whilst these do not come under the remit of the current document, it is well to remember that language can rarely be considered in isolation.

4.3 Differences across languages

Some language registers are language-specific. In other cases similar language registers are found in many languages, especially where language communities share social characteristics, such as respect for certain members of society, or peer group solidarity. Language communities with very different social structures, for example a highly stratified community compared to one with no strong hierarchies, are more likely to find that some of their language registers have no equivalent in the other language. Different language registers can serve different purposes in different communities, for example to emphasise social distance, or to signal group membership.

4.4 Descriptive and prescriptive registers

A typology of language registers includes the descriptive, for example, of slang, informal varieties, literary registers, and the prescriptive, for example, simplified languages, and controlled languages for use in critical communications. From the perspective of a typology of language registers, simplified natural language is one specific example of a prescribed language register. Attempts to label different language registers are found in many descriptive dictionaries, although there can be inconsistencies in lexicographic descriptions. Guidelines on the use of prescriptive registers are sometimes published, for example, by the Plain English campaign, or as company or newspaper style guides.

4.5 Text types, contexts, and linguistic characteristics

This document follows the definitions in Clause 3 of language register and various subregisters. Different schools of linguists and literary theorists have understood terms such as 'language register', 'genre', 'text type' and 'style' in various ways, thus causing confusion and conflicting arguments. Although there is some overlap in these and other related concepts, in this document, 'language register' is related not only to a particular genre or text type, but is also identified by its linguistic characteristics. These internal linguistic characteristics make it possible to identify individual language registers, and develop computational methods of tagging them where needed, for example, in the management of translation memories where consistency of register is needed in the translation output.

Humans are usually able to vary the language registers they use according to contextual and situational parameters. In this language registers differ from dialects, which are associated with different groups of speakers with a geographical or societal distribution.

4.6 Language registers as formal to informal or high to low continua

There is some correlation between language registers and text type, with some sociolinguists arguing that language registers are linguistic varieties linked to occupations, professions or topics and are usually characterized solely by vocabulary differences. Others, however, point out that there is no general consensus within sociolinguistics on the use of register and related terms such as genre and style. Understanding language registers as only differences in vocabulary and closely tied to different domains is at odds with general language descriptions of 'high' and 'low' registers or 'formal' and 'informal'.

Examples of language registers include high/low registers, formal/informal registers, royal/common registers, neutral (standard) registers, technical registers, legal registers, mafia talk, slang, motherese (baby talk), clear and plain language. Language registers can be placed on a continuum from the most to the least formal, and from the most prescribed to the least prescribed use of language. Prescription can take the form of human-mediated guidelines, or computer-mediated control of language use.

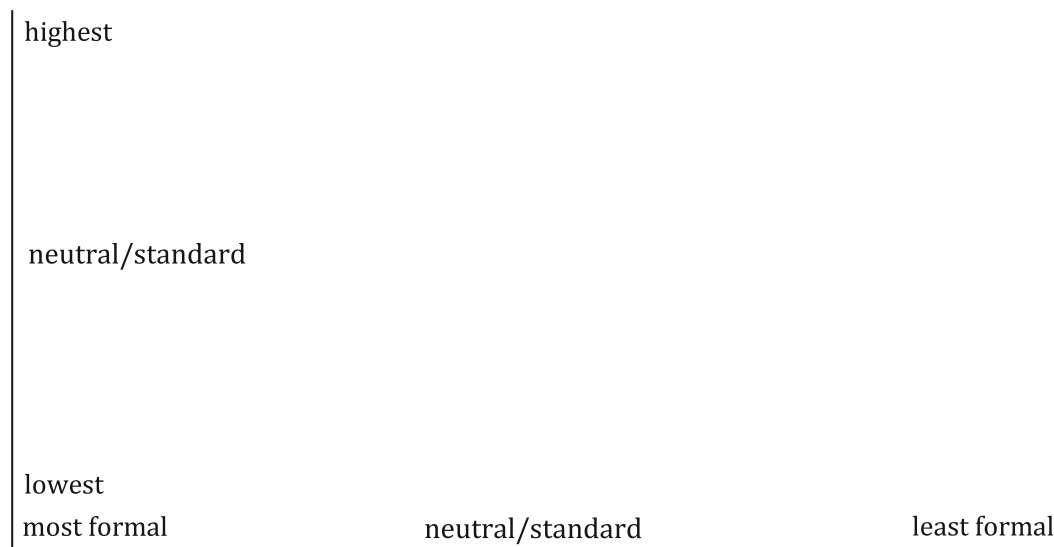The register continuum can be represented horizontally or vertically.

highest

neutral/standard

lowest

most formal   neutral/standard   least formal

Figure 1 — Language registers on a vertical high to low continuum contrasted with a horizontal most formal to least formal continuum

Some registers, specifically royal ones, can represent a break in the continuum, where it is argued that they do not represent a 'yet more formal' register, but can be a form of diglossia, or a different kind of language with its own set of rules and conventions outside the normal range of language registers.

4.7 Division into subregistries

Individual language registers are further divided into subregisters, for example the technical register is often subdivided into domain-specific registers, such as medical register, legal register and engineering register. A further division of domain-specific registers can be in-house registers, which are confined to individual companies or organisations.

4.8 Language registers and other language varieties

The list of permissible values for the data category/register historically listed in the Data Category Repository (DatCatInfo[1)]) as common in terminology databases does not conform to the categories of language registers discussed in this document.

Dialect is not considered a type of register in this document and is more appropriately classed as another type of language variety or category.

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1)   DatCatInfo is available at www.datcatinfo.net. It is maintained by LTAC/TerminOrgs. This information is given for the convenience of the users of this document and does not constitute an endorsement by ISO of this product.