# 1 Registers, genres, and styles: fundamental varieties of language

## 1.1 Text varieties in your daily life

Before you begin this book, take a minute to think about all the different kinds of texts that you encounter over the course of a normal day. In the morning, maybe you have a conversation with a roommate. As you have breakfast, you might listen to a radio announcer or read the morning newspaper. Then you might make a telephone call to a friend or family member. As you get ready for a class, you might proofread a paper that is due that day or look over the reading you did for homework. When you attend the class, you probably talk with friends, listen to a lecture, and write notes. And that's just the first few hours of your day!

For most people, conversation is the most common type of spoken language that they produce. But people typically listen to many different kinds of spoken language: television shows, commercials, radio or television news reports, classroom lectures, political speeches, sermons, and so on. Written language also plays a very important role in daily life for many people. Students usually produce many kinds of writing: notes during class sessions, written assignments, term papers, and possibly numerous text messages and/or e-mail messages. But similar to spoken language, most people read more than they write. In fact, many people read even more different kinds of texts than they listen to: newspaper articles, editorials, novels, e-mail messages, blogs, text messages, letters and ads in the mail, magazine articles, ads in magazines, textbooks, research articles, course syllabi, and other written assignments or handouts.

This book investigates the language used in these different kinds of texts (both spoken and written). You will see how almost any kind of text has its own characteristic *linguistic features*. For example, it would not be surprising to end a conversation with the following utterance:

ok, see ya later.

But it would be almost inconceivable that this sentence would end a textbook. Rather, language like the following is much more typical:

Processes of producing and understanding discourse are matters of human feeling and human interaction. An understanding of these processes in

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> language will contribute to a rational as well as ethical and humane basis for understanding what it means to be human.      [the concluding two sentences from Tannen 2005.]

How are these two examples different linguistically? And why do those differences exist? These questions are central to the analysis of text varieties – ***registers***, ***genres***, and ***styles*** – the focus of the present book.

We use the terms *register*, *genre*, and *style* to refer to three different perspectives on text varieties. The register perspective combines an analysis of linguistic characteristics that are common in a text variety with analysis of the situation of use of the variety. The underlying assumption of the register perspective is that core linguistic features like pronouns and verbs are functional, and, as a result, particular features are commonly used in association with the communicative purposes and situational context of texts. The genre perspective is similar to the register perspective in that it includes description of the purposes and situational context of a text variety, but its linguistic analysis contrasts with the register perspective by focusing on the conventional structures used to construct a complete text within the variety, for example, the conventional way in which a letter begins and ends. The style perspective is similar to the register perspective in its linguistic focus, analyzing the use of core linguistic features that are distributed throughout text samples from a variety. The key difference from the register perspective is that the use of these features is not functionally motivated by the situational context; rather, style features reflect aesthetic preferences, associated with particular authors or historical periods.

The present book focuses mostly on the register perspective because this perspective is important for the description of all text varieties. That is, any text sample of any type can be analyzed from a register perspective. Because the other two perspectives are more specialized, we provide a less thorough treatment of their characteristics. However, we include discussion of those perspectives at several places in the book, when they are especially useful for understanding the text variety being described. For example, the style perspective is especially useful for discussing fictional prose. The genre perspective is especially useful for discussing academic research articles.

We return to a much fuller introduction of the three perspectives in Section 1.4 below. However, we first take up several more basic issues relating to the study of text varieties and their general role in language and society.

### 1.1.1    Why is it important to analyze text varieties?

As a native speaker of a language, you acquired many text varieties without explicitly studying them. For example, nobody explained formal rules for having conversations, or how the rules change when you converse with your closest friend rather than your mother or when you "converse" via text message rather than spoken language. However, many other varieties are usually learned

with explicit instruction. For example, if you are training for a job as a preacher, you will probably explicitly learn about sermons. If you are training for a job as a journalist, you will practice writing the language of newspaper articles.

One of the most important goals of formal schooling is teaching text varieties that might not be acquired outside of school. Even before going to school, most children are exposed to written stories and learn how narratives are different from normal conversation. Early in school, children learn to read books of many different types, including fictional stories, historical accounts of past events, and descriptions of natural phenomena. These varieties rely on different linguistic structures and patterns, and students must learn how to recognize and interpret those differences. At the same time, students must learn how to produce some of these different varieties, for example writing a narrative essay on what they did during summer vacation versus a persuasive essay on whether the school cafeteria should sell candy. The amount of explicit instruction in different text varieties varies across teachers, schools, and countries, but even at a young age, students must somehow learn to control and interpret the language of different varieties, or they will not succeed at school.

Textual tasks become more and more demanding as a student progresses through school. A university education requires the ability to read and understand academic prose, a variety that is extremely different from face-to-face conversation. Further, students must learn how to produce written texts from many different specific sub-varieties within academic prose, including persuasive essays in freshman composition, lab reports in science courses, and summary/synthesis prose responses on final exams. One of the main goals of a university education is to learn the specialized register of a particular profession, whether electrical engineering, chemistry, sociology, finance, or English education. Success requires learning the particular language patterns that are expected for particular situations and communicative purposes.

The task of learning register/genre differences is even more challenging for a non-native speaker of a language. For example, thousands of students speak languages other than English but choose to attend a university where the primary language of education is English (e.g., in the US, UK, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Singapore, India, etc.). Traditionally, these students were taught general vocabulary and grammatical rules of English in preparation for advanced study. However, in recent years, many applied linguists have come to realize that this is not enough to ensure students' success. Students also need knowledge of register/genre differences to succeed in their university educations. This awareness has given rise to the general field of *English for Academic Purposes (EAP)*, which focuses on teaching the English-language skills that are especially helpful for the registers/genres used in universities. Similarly, the subfield of *English for Specific Purposes (ESP)* focuses on description of the language used in registers and genres from a particular profession or academic discipline (such as biochemistry or physical therapy), with the ultimate goal of developing instructional materials that will help students learn the particular language patterns that

are typical for the different situations and different kinds of texts in those fields. But even proficiency with very specific registers/genres is not enough for students and professionals; some non-native speakers are criticized for sounding too much "like a book" when they speak. Thus, proficiency with spoken registers for conversations and meetings is also important.

Register, genre, and style differences are fundamentally important for any student with a primary interest in language. For example, any student majoring in English, or in the study of another language like Japanese or Spanish, must understand the text varieties in that language. If you are training to become a teacher (e.g. for secondary education or for TESL), you will shortly be faced with the task of teaching your own students how to use the words and structures that are appropriate to different spoken and written tasks – different registers and genres. Other students of language are more interested in the study of literature or the creative writing of new literature, issues relating to the style perspective, since the literary effects that distinguish one novel (or poem) from the next are realized as linguistic differences. While many literary scholars and creative writers become highly proficient without formal training in linguistic analysis, the tools provided in the present book provide an additional perspective for those tasks.

Overall, then, text varieties and the differences among them constantly affect people's daily lives. Proficiency with these varieties affects not only success as a student, but also as a practitioner of any profession, from engineering to creative writing to teaching. Receptive mastery of different text varieties increases access to information, while productive mastery increases the ability to participate in varying communities. And if you cannot analyze a variety that is new to you, you cannot help yourself or others learn to master it. This book provides the foundational knowledge that you will need to effectively analyze, understand, and teach awareness of differences among text varieties.

## 1.2    Texts, varieties, registers, and dialects

Variability is inherent in human language: people use different linguistic forms on different occasions, and different speakers of a language will say the same thing in different ways. Most of this ***linguistic variation*** is highly systematic. Speakers of a language make choices in pronunciation, morphology, word choice, and grammar depending on a number of non-linguistic factors. These factors include the speaker's purpose in communication, the relationship between speaker and hearer, the production circumstances, and the social characteristics of the speaker.

At the highest level, linguistic variation is realized as different languages (e.g., Korean, French, Swahili). At the lowest level, linguistic variation is realized as the differences between one speaker compared to another speaker, or as the differences between two texts produced by the same speaker.

In the present book, we use the term **text** to refer to natural language used for communication, whether it is realized in speech or writing. Thus, a research paper is a text, as is a novel or a newspaper article. In speech, a sermon and a face-to-face conversation are both texts.

The notion of text is somewhat fluid as we use it here. First of all, we sometimes distinguish between a **complete text** and a **text excerpt**. A complete text is an instance of extended discourse that has a clear start and finish, such as a research article or a sermon. However, many of the "texts" that we discuss in the book are actually text excerpts: segments of discourse extracted from a larger complete text. Thus, we might discuss a text excerpt of two–three paragraphs from a novel, or several turns of interaction from a conversation.

Further, the notion of complete text is in itself somewhat fluid. First, texts can be considered at different levels of generality. Thus, a chapter in a book might be considered a complete text, but the entire book might also be considered as a complete text. Similarly in spoken language, a joke told during a sermon might be considered as a complete text, but the entire sermon can also be treated as a complete text. Beyond that, the boundaries of complete texts are not always explicit or clear-cut. This is especially the case in speech. For example, suppose you are having a conversation with your friend Trisha, and then her friend Ami walks up and joins the conversation. A little later, you need to leave, but Trisha and Ami continue to talk. How many conversations have there been? And where are the boundaries of each? For example, did the conversation between Trisha and Ami begin when Ami arrived, or when you left?

In the following chapters we use the notion of *complete text* in cases where it is relatively clear-cut, such as for a complete research article that has a distinct beginning and ending. In other cases, we use the more general term *text* as a cover term for any extended segment of discourse from speech or writing.

Texts can be described according to their contexts, considering the characteristics of the people who produced the texts, and the characteristics of the situations and communicative purposes associated with the texts. The general term **variety** is used for a category of texts that share some social or situational characteristic. For example, a *national variety of English* refers to the texts produced by the speakers of English who reside in a specific country (e.g., British English, Australian English, Indian English, etc.).

Much of the research in sociolinguistics has focused on varieties that are associated with different groups of speakers (e.g. people who live in different geographic regions, different socio-economic classes, ethnic groups, women versus men, etc.). These socially defined varieties are referred to as **dialects**.

However, the present book deals instead with text varieties that occur in particular situations of use – registers, genres, and styles. Our primary focus in the book is the notion of register and the process of register analysis, introduced in the following section. However, we return to a fuller discussion of social varieties (dialects) and other perspectives on text varieties in later sections.
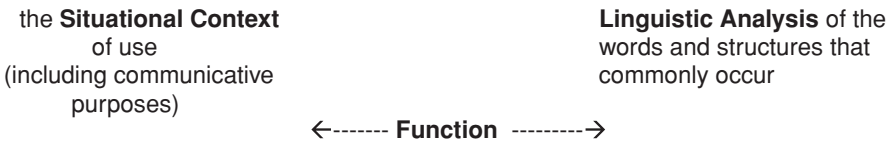
the **Situational Context**　　　　　　**Linguistic Analysis** of the
　　　　of use　　　　　　　　　　　　words and structures that
(including communicative　　　　　　commonly occur
　　　purposes)

←------- **Function** --------→

Figure 1.1 *Components in a register analysis*

## 1.3　　　Registers and register analysis: an overview

As noted above, we focus primarily on the register perspective in this book, because it can be used to describe any text excerpt from any variety. However, the methodological techniques used for register analyses are also applicable to the genre and style perspectives. In the present section, we provide an overview of register analysis, establishing the foundation that will be used throughout the book. Then, in Section 1.4, we provide a much fuller introduction to the genre and style perspectives in comparison to the register perspective.

### 1.3.1　　Register analysis: situation, linguistic features, functions

In general terms, a *register* is a variety associated with a particular situation of use (including particular communicative purposes). The description of a register covers three major components: the situational context, the linguistic features, and the functional relationships between the first two components (Figure 1.1).

Registers are described for their typical lexical and grammatical characteristics: their *linguistic features*. But registers are also described for their *situational contexts*, for example whether they are produced in speech or writing, whether they are interactive, and what their primary communicative purposes are. One of the central arguments of the book is that linguistic features are always *functional* when considered from a register perspective. That is, linguistic features tend to occur in a register because they are particularly well suited to the purposes and situational context of the register. Thus, the third component of any register description is the functional analysis.

Registers can be identified and described based on analysis of either complete texts or a collection of text excerpts. This is because the linguistic component of a register analysis requires identification of the *pervasive* linguistic features in the variety: linguistic characteristics that might occur in any variety but are much more common in the target register. It is these pervasive linguistic features that are clearly functional, as exemplified below.

Situational varieties can also be described by analyzing language features that characterize complete texts, referred to as the genre perspective in the present

book. Genre features are not pervasive; rather, they might occur only one time in a complete text, often at the beginning or ending boundary. They are also often conventional rather than functional. Section 1.4 below provides a fuller discussion of the similarities and differences between the genre and register perspectives on situational varieties.

For a simple example of the register analysis process, briefly consider face-to-face conversation. First of all, it is important to note the situational characteristics of conversation that distinguish it from other registers. Face-to-face conversation requires direct interaction between at least two people who are together in the same place at the same time. Both participants must speak (or the conversation would become a monologue). Furthermore, while many specific topics and purposes are possible, it is generally appropriate for participants to discuss events, thoughts, and opinions related to their personal lives or something in the immediate context.

The second step is to describe the typical (pervasive) linguistic features of conversation. This step requires consideration of multiple texts from the target register, to discover the linguistic features that are frequent across texts (and not characteristic of only a single text). Previous register studies have found three linguistic features (among many others) to be more common in conversation than in many other registers: first person pronouns (*I* and *we*), second person pronouns (*you*), and questions.

Finally, the third step of a register analysis is to interpret the relationship between situational characteristics and pervasive linguistic features in functional terms. To make these functions concrete, consider Text Sample 1.1, a typical passage of conversation.

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**Text Sample 1.1   Conversation (a group of friends is walking to a restaurant)**

Judith: Yeah I just found out that Rebekah is going to the University of Chicago to get her PhD. I really want to go visit her. Maybe I'll come out and see her.
Eric:   Oh is she?
Judith: Yeah.
Eric:   Oh good.
Elias:  Here, do you want one? [offering a candy]
Judith: What kind is it?
Elias:  Cinnamon.
Judith: Oh.
Kate:   Those are good.
Eric:   They're good.
Elias:  That's the joy of life.
Kate:   Did you guys come through the plaza on your way?

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| Judith: | No. |
| Kate: | You have to go through it on your way home. It probably would be empty. |
| Elias: | We drove through it tonight. |
| Judith: | Yeah we'll do that. |
| Eric: | I don't like the color lights on the tree though. |
| Kate: | Did they put fake ones up in there one year? |
| Elias: | No they're just all around on all the buildings. |
| Kate: | Oh yeah. |
| Elias: | I think it would be kind of dumb to put them on the ground. |

[LSWE Corpus]

In this passage the specific topics switch abruptly, but – typical of conversation – the participants are discussing their own thoughts, attitudes, and actions with first person pronouns (*I just found out*, *I really want*, *I don't like*, *I think*), and they use second person pronouns to address each other (*Do **you** want . . .* , *Did **you** guys . . .*). Questions are used as part of the direct interaction with each other, often incorporating the use of first and second person pronouns. Thus, these linguistic features are especially frequent in conversation because they have a functional relation to the situational characteristics of both the physical context and the general communicative purposes of conversation.

Register characteristics become more salient if an analysis contrasts two different registers. For example, in contrast to the speakers in a conversation, the author of a front-page newspaper article is not addressing a specific person, and there is no direct interaction between a specific reader and the author. It is also not normally relevant for the author to describe her own personal feelings or other aspects of her personal life. As a result of these functional considerations, there are normally few first and second person pronouns and questions in front-page newspaper articles. These differences illustrate a key aspect of register analysis that we will return to repeatedly throughout the book: the characteristics of any individual register become much more apparent when it is compared to other registers.

### 1.3.2     More details about registers and register analysis

The last section introduced the notion of register as a variety associated with a particular situation of use (including particular communicative purposes). The description of a register has three major components: the situational/communicative description, the description of pervasive linguistic features, and the analysis of the functional associations between linguistic forms and situational contexts.

A few points deserve further development here:

### 1.3.2.1   The situational characteristics of registers are more basic than the linguistic features

Registers differ in both their situational and linguistic characteristics. However, the situational characteristics are more basic. All speakers use language in different contexts, under different circumstances, for different purposes. Those patterns of behavior cannot be derived from any linguistic phenomena. In contrast, the linguistic differences among registers can be derived from situational differences, because linguistic features are functional.

For example, imagine what it would be like if the linguistic considerations were primary. In that case, you might be sitting at your computer and suddenly feel like producing a text with lots of pronouns (*I* and *you*) and lots of questions, and only later realize that such a text must occur in a conversational context, so you would go around looking for someone to have a conversation with. Obviously this is not how communication works. Rather, you find yourself in a conversational situation, and because of that you start to produce language with the linguistic features that are appropriate for a conversation. Chapter 2 will introduce a framework for the situational analysis of registers, including the role of culture in defining them, but even this brief example illustrates how registers are determined by their situational characteristics.

### 1.3.2.2   Registers differ in their characteristic *distributions* of pervasive linguistic features, not the single occurrence of an individual feature

We will have much more to say about how to analyze the linguistic features of a register in Chapter 3, but it is important to note from the outset that very few registers can be identified by unique lexical or grammatical features. Instead, to carry out the linguistic analysis of a register, you must consider the extent to which linguistic features are used, in order to identify the linguistic features that are pervasive and especially common in the target register.

For example, it is not the case that conversation always uses pronouns and never any nouns, or that newspaper writing always uses nouns and never any pronouns. Instead both registers use both nouns and pronouns. However, conversation uses more pronouns and fewer nouns, while newspaper writing uses more nouns and fewer pronouns. In other words, the relative distribution of nouns and pronouns differs greatly between conversation and newspaper writing. The linguistic analysis of registers is based on such differences in the relative distribution of linguistic features, which are especially common and pervasive in some registers but comparatively rare in other registers.

### 1.3.2.3   Register analysis requires both situational and linguistic analysis, often applied cyclically

In a register analysis, both the situational components and the linguistic features are explicitly described. The functional interpretation, then, is based on comparison of the situational and linguistic analyses.

New register studies usually begin with at least some analysis of the situational characteristics. As Chapter 2 will explain in more detail, initial analysis of the situational characteristics can be important for selecting appropriate text samples to include in a study. However, often in a register analysis you will find that there are surprises resulting from the linguistic analysis: certain linguistic features will occur more frequently (or rarely) than you expected. These unexpected linguistic patterns will often require that you re-assess the situational characteristics of the register, especially with respect to less obvious characteristics like the communicative purpose. Thus, the process of register analysis is often iterative.

### 1.3.2.4    Register variation has a *functional* basis

The linguistic differences among registers are not arbitrary. For example, it is not sufficient to merely note that the language of conversation has many second person pronouns and questions because it is an accepted convention to use these features in conversation. Rather, register analyses always include description of the situational context and interpretation of *why* particular linguistic features commonly occur in that context. The functional associations between linguistic patterns and situational factors are at the heart of studying register variation, and are further discussed in Chapter 3.

### 1.3.2.5    Registers can be identified on different levels of specificity

A register can be extremely general, like textbooks. But what about textbooks in linguistics? Graduate-level textbooks in sociolinguistics? In fact, any of these can be identified as a register.

There is no one correct level on which to identify a register. Rather, it depends on the goals of your study. You may want to characterize the register of academic prose, a very general register. Or you may be interested in only research articles, a more specific register within academic prose. Or you might focus on medical research articles, or even only the methods sections of experimental medical research articles. All of these can be considered registers, differing in their level of generality. As a register category becomes more specific, it is possible to identify its situational and linguistic characteristics more precisely. Chapter 2 will have much more to say about general vs. specialized registers. At this point, it is simply important to realize that registers can be studied on many different levels of specificity.

### 1.3.2.6    Register analyses must be based on a representative sample of texts

Because a register analysis seeks to characterize a variety of language – not a particular text or an individual writer's style – it must be based on analysis of a sample of texts selected to represent the register as fully as possible. In many places in this book, we exemplify what is known about certain registers with single, short text passages; these texts have been carefully chosen