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# 1 Register

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In order to appreciate fully what is meant by the term ‘register’ and how vital it is in the advanced study of a foreign language, it is necessary first of all to consider it against the general background of what are known as varieties of language.

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## 1.1 Varieties of language

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Students talking among themselves would use a different type of vocabulary and even different grammatical structures from those they would use when addressing their teacher, or when being interviewed for a job, or when talking to a young child – or a dog. They would use different vocabulary and structures when writing an essay on 20th-century French literature, when talking about pop music or feminism with friends in a pub, or when visiting grandparents. A person can speak formally or informally, or can use an appropriate shade of formality. The intention can be to persuade, to encourage, to inform, to amuse. One can express oneself in writing, in conversation, in a speech. A person can speak in a professional role, for instance as a teacher, a lawyer or a doctor. It is clear that people have at their command many different ways of expressing themselves depending upon circumstances. Language is used for a variety of purposes, in a variety of situations and is expressed by a variety of means. A language should not therefore be seen as a homogeneous whole, but as a collection of varieties. There exist varieties of English; there are also varieties of French, German, Spanish, and so on.

At the same time as children acquire the grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation systems of their own language, they acquire in addition an increasing intuitive awareness of the varieties available in their language and of when to use them appropriately. However, for the foreign-language learner, acquiring the capacity to operate within an appropriate variety of language is a more conscious matter, although even here, with increasing competence, selection of the appropriate variety becomes increasingly automatic.

A variety of language is determined by a number of factors; some

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are peripheral, others central in importance. In this book we are not concerned with varieties themselves, but with one of the essential factors which constitute them, register.

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**1.2 Peripheral factors**

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The way French speakers use their language is affected by such matters as their sex (a woman may have different general speech characteristics from a man), their age (for example whether they are adolescents or octogenarians), where they come from (for example a Parisian, a Marseillais and a Martiniquan will all have idiosyncrasies of speech which are due to their places of origin), and their socio-economic standing (that is to say the degree of education they have received and their social and professional status). These are factors over which the speaker has little, if any, control, as they are deeprooted ingredients of his/her individuality. They are, therefore, of secondary importance in an analysis of varieties of language.

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**1.3 Central factors**

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Of much greater immediate importance in determining the composition of varieties are the following factors: subject matter, purpose, medium and register.

**1.3.1 Field**

What one is talking about affects the way one expresses oneself. For example, when the French discuss politics they will draw upon a certain vocabulary which would be quite inappropriate in a discussion on zoology, although, of course, there are certain ‘common core’ features which are used whatever the topic under discussion. The term ‘field’ is used to denote the subject matter of a conversation, speech, etc. It means a collection of words and expressions relating specifically to a certain topic, for example politics, and covers the many types of situations in which politics may be discussed. It may be politics as practised by a politician, or as reported by a political correspondent in the press, or as debated over a glass of wine between friends in a bar. The field includes, therefore, not only the technical vocabulary of the professional but also the less technical vocabulary used by the non-specialist talking about the same subject.

**1.3.2 Purpose**

Whatever the status of the speaker – whether he/she is a politician, or the political correspondent of a daily newspaper, or simply a layperson

talking politics with a friend – language is used with a purpose. The politician will attempt to persuade; the political journalist to inform, comment and/or evaluate; the layman may simply chat, or may adopt the stance of the politician or journalist depending upon knowledge, inclination or intention.

### 1.3.3 Medium

The medium of communication also needs to be taken into account. By medium is meant the vehicle through which the subject matter is conveyed to a listener or an audience. In politics it may be a speech made in parliament or at the hustings, it may be a written report of a debate or a manifesto, a piece of propaganda used in an election campaign, or simply a conversation. The spontaneous expression of a conversation will contrast with the carefully prepared wording of a speech: the medium therefore places constraints on the way one expresses oneself.

### 1.3.4 Register

The final factor to consider in this analysis of varieties of language is register. Register is concerned with the relationship that exists between a speaker and the person he/she is speaking to. In other words it is the degree of formality or informality which a speaker accords the listener. This degree of formality/informality depends in turn upon four variable factors, in increasing order of importance: sex, age, status and intimacy. The sex of the speaker or listener, the least important of the variables, may not even be relevant in certain situations. However, sometimes it is: exclusively male or female gatherings often have their own peculiar speech habits which are a direct result of the company present; a young man talking to his girlfriend may use a different standard of language from that which he will use when he is chatting to his male friends; it may involve only a slight adjustment – does he swear in the presence of women? However, even this question is not so straightforward as it may seem – that men should consider moderating or changing their language in the company of women would be ill received by certain women. Conversely, certain young and not-so-young women now take pride in adopting as free a manner to express themselves as they feel men already have. Differences between the language used by the two sexes are tending to disappear among some groups. The age of a speaker has already been mentioned in 1.2 as having a bearing upon the way he/she speaks – elderly speakers have different speech habits from younger ones – but in this section it is the possibility of varying the way one speaks, according to the age of the person spoken to, that is relevant. Parents talking to young children will use a different, simpler, vocabulary and grammar from that which they would use when talking to colleagues or contemporaries. In the same way, a

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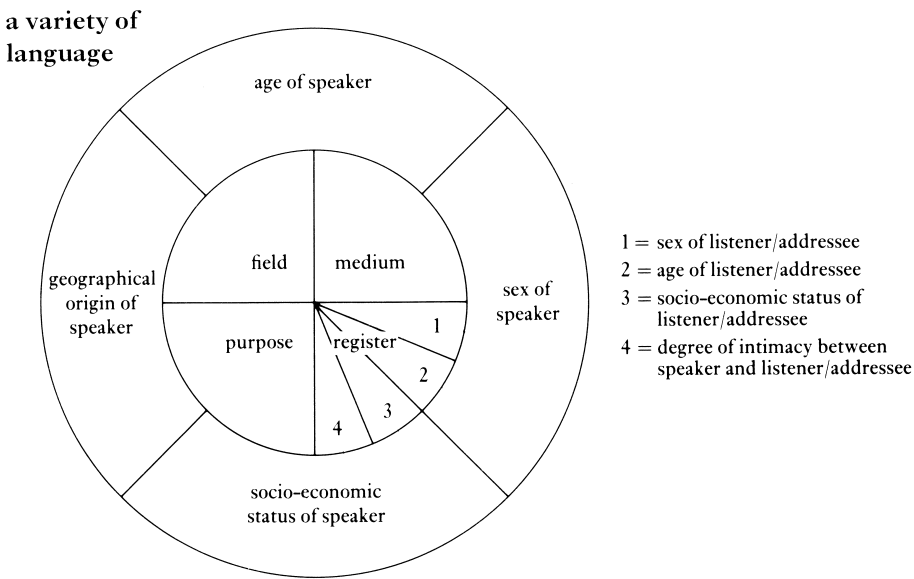
teacher will use a different level of language in classroom and common room. Status also plays an important role in determining register. When discussed in 1.2, status was used to refer to the degree of education and the social and professional standing of the speaker. In this section it refers to the ability of a person to adjust his/her speech according to the status of the person addressed: an employee in a factory talking to a director, the director in turn talking to an employee, a shop assistant serving a customer, will use different registers because of their respective positions in the social or professional hierarchy. Finally and most important, intimacy, the degree to which speakers know and trust each other, affects the way they speak to each other. A first encounter between two persons requires a different register from that required by a conversation between a husband and wife celebrating their fourth wedding anniversary. These four factors, sex, age, status and intimacy, combine to produce register, the relationship of formality/informality existing between speakers.

The relationship between these factors, particularly those of age and status, and the peripheral factors mentioned briefly in 1.2, needs to be considered briefly. There is, of necessity, some interaction between the two types of factor. To examine first the relationship between the age of the speaker (peripheral) and the age of the person addressed (central), it is clear that in certain cases the age of the speaker will override his/her ability to adjust to the level of the person addressed: for example, a child will not have the necessary linguistic sophistication to adjust its speech in order to address an adult in an adult way; at the other end of the age range, an elderly person may lose the expertise he/she once possessed to adjust his/her speech to become comprehensible to a child, or such a person may never have had sufficient experience of children's language to realise what adjustments should be made. Similarly for status: it is well known that, for certain people, the linguistic patterns peculiar to their class or profession are so indelibly ingrained that they are unable or would consider it demeaning to vary their speech: it is unlikely that a poorly-educated person will be in a position to produce the appropriate level of language when conversing with a person of higher social standing; conversely a person of aristocratic stock may find it extremely difficult to eliminate from his/her speech those linguistic elements which are all but innate, when addressing someone of lower social rank. There are circumstances, therefore, when a certain neutralisation of the effects of the various factors occurs.

A corollary of register concerns the character of the language actually produced, more precisely the degree of explicitness which is necessary for communication within a given situation. In particular, the more intimately one knows someone, the more similar the socio-economic status and to a lesser degree the ages involved, the more information that can be taken for granted in conversation and the less

need for formal structuring of language (1.6.1): there is no need to be explicit about family matters within the family or about business affairs with close colleagues, because in these cases so much is common knowledge and may be left unspecified. On the other hand, strangers meeting for the first time or students attending an induction course require detailed explanations of every aspect of this new experience or undertaking and an elaborate, grammatically correct structuring of what is said (1.6.4 and 1.6.5).


It is now possible to show in diagrammatic form how all these factors combine to constitute a variety of language.



### 1.4 Register as used in this book

According to the definition of the previous section (1.3.4), register involves the relationship of formality/informality existing between the two participants in a conversation or any other situation in which language is used. The most accurate way of representing register would be to envisage it as a scale extending from extreme informality at one end to extreme formality at the other, with a multitude of different shades of formality in between. However, for ease of reference and use in this book, the scale will be divided into three distinct sections, each of which will cover a third of the scale of formality. These three sections will be known as R1, R2 and R3 and their major characteristics may be summarised in the following way:

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extreme informality		extreme formality
		
<b>R1</b> very informal, casual, colloquial, familiar, careless, admitting new terms almost indiscriminately, certain terms short-lived, at times truncated, elliptical, incorrect grammatically, prone to redundant expressions, includes slang expressions and vulgarisms, likely to include regional variations	<b>R2</b> standard, polite, educated, equivalent of 'BBC English', compromise between the two extremes	<b>R3</b> formal, literary, official, with archaic ring, language of scholars and purists, meticulously correct, reluctant to admit new terms

It must be stressed once more that these sections are the result of an artificial division and that the reality behind them consists of subtle, imperceptible shifts, not of rigidly defined categories. (We have confined these register divisions to three, as being more practicable to handle, although scholars in the field often distinguish five.)

A few comments on the above schematisation of register are called for. Because the divisions are arbitrary, some examples (2.10.1) do not fit exactly into one of the sections: in such circumstances the notation R1/R2 or R2/R3 is used. When a usage occurs in two registers the notation R1 and R2 or R2 and R3 is used. Whereas R2 and R3 appear more homogeneous as divisions of register, R1 covers a rich range of informal language, stretching, for example, from obscene interjections to unobjectionable ones (2.10.1); the notation R1\* is used to encompass vulgar language (eg **foutre, merde, putain**). At times language included in R1 is in fact grammatically incorrect and frequently swings from elliptical usage to an extensive use of unnecessary repetition.

Looking towards the future, it is possible that some of what at present are deemed incorrect usages contained in R1 will become socially acceptable language. It is interesting to observe that the *tolérances* – lists of grammatical and orthographical usages previously condemned but now accepted – issued by the French government for the benefit of examiners quite frequently concern matters of register (although this is not explicitly acknowledged by the authorities). What was considered typically R1 usage, and therefore shunned by the users of ‘correct’ R2/R3 French, is raised by decree to at least R2 status:

eg an examiner may now accept:  
**c’est là de beaux résultats**  
as well as the traditionally only acceptable  
**ce sont là de beaux résultats**

similarly, in the matter of sequence of tenses with the subjunctive (3.7.1),

**j'avais souhaité qu'il vienne sans tarder**

is now tolerated as well as

**j'avais souhaité qu'il vînt sans tarder**

Although the *tolérances* have official backing, they do not always find universal acceptance outside such circles:

eg **la fillette, obéissante à sa mère, alla se coucher**

**j'ai recueilli cette chienne errante dans le quartier  
étant données les circonstances (3.6.3.2)**

Another characteristic of R1 usage which should be stressed is the fact that many items of its vocabulary are ephemeral in nature. In slang and popular speech there are noticeable preferences for certain types of words, namely those which are striking by their sound or by the manner in which they are created (usually as a result of a metaphorical extension of meaning). Such words are frequently victims of the ravages of fashion and within a relatively short period of time tend to become overworked, thus losing their impact and appeal, and need to be replaced. A rapid turnover in vocabulary is the result: words that are on everyone's lips one year, or even for part of a year, seem terribly dated the following year, and using an out-of-date term may well mark a speaker as being 'past it' or at least old-fashioned. (For this reason a number of the terms included in 2.10.1 will have a limited life-span.)

The phenomenon of register switch should also be illustrated. It is likely that uneducated speakers will use only R1 whatever social situation they find themselves in, whereas an educated speaker will be able to command all three with equal ease, passing from one end of the scale to the other without great difficulty. To go further than was possible in section 1.3.4 and to give a specific example drawn from higher education, a formal lecture would normally be delivered in R3, whereas a seminar would normally be conducted in R2, and, depending upon the degree of friendliness existing between lecturer and student, it is conceivable that a one-to-one tutorial might be carried on in R1: linguistic distinctions based upon differences of sex, age and status disappear with deepening intimacy. It is not, of course, only lecturers who have the ability to switch register! A native speaker's ability to adjust his/her register in various circumstances is the key to avoiding offence and to gaining acceptance in any given situation. The degree to which a foreign learner can achieve that ability to adjust his/her register is a mark of competence in, and mastery of, the foreign language.

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## 1.5 Illustration of register

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Register affects all aspects of language: pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. Although vocabulary and grammar are the major

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preoccupations of this book, it is worthwhile considering briefly some of the effects of register upon the pronunciation of French.

1.5.1 Pronunciation and liaison

The making of valid general comments upon the issues raised by pronunciation is fraught with risks. Pronunciation is the least stable, most variable aspect of a person’s speech habits, and it is well known that a single individual will not necessarily always pronounce the same word in the same way. Consequently the observations that follow must be appreciated in the light of such a reservation. Another problem is that certain tendencies of pronunciation are restricted to a particular region; in such cases disentangling accent from register is very difficult.

On the whole, as might be expected, an R1 speaker tends to be less careful about pronunciation than an R2 and particularly an R3 speaker. In what follows, R1 usage is contrasted with R2 and R3 usages, and regionalisms will be kept as far as possible to a minimum.

The most obvious general characteristic of R1 pronunciation is a relative laziness of articulation, resulting in, amongst other things, the loss of certain sounds or the introduction or change of others. This is illustrated in the following ways. It should be noted that it is not always a matter of, for example, the clear-cut presence or absence of /r/ (ie /kat/ versus /katr/), but of a gradual movement from precise articulation to more indistinct articulation of the sound.

Register marked in treatment of	R1 and example		R2+R3	written form
consonants: reduction of groups of consonants	/gʒ/ → /ʒ/	/syʒesjɔ̃/	/sygʒestjɔ̃/	<i>suggestion</i>
	/ks/ → /s/	/eskyz/	/ɛkskyz/	<i>excuse</i>
		/espedisjɔ̃/	/ɛkspedisjɔ̃/	<i>expédition</i>
		/ɛsplwa/	/ɛksplwa/	<i>exploit</i>
	/lk/ → /k/	/kɛkʃɔz/	/kɛlkəʃɔz/	<i>quelque chose</i>
	/st/ → /s/	/ʒesjɔ̃/	/ʒestjɔ̃/	<i>gestion</i>
	/tr/ → /t/	/ptɛt/	/pɔtɛtr/	<i>peut-être</i>
		/kat/	/katr/	<i>quatre</i>
		/vɔt/	/vɔtr/	<i>votre</i>
		/i fɛ bo/	/il fɛ bo/	<i>il fait beau</i>
dropping of consonants		/i vjɛ̃/	/il vjɛ̃/	<i>il vient</i>
	/r/	/rəgadə/	/rəgarde/	<i>regarder</i>
	/t/	/vɛ̃dø/ to	/vɛ̃tdø/ to	<i>vingt-deux to</i>
	(all numbers from 22 to 29)	/vɛ̃nœf/	/vɛ̃tnœf/	<i>vingt-neuf</i>
change of consonant	/s/ → /z/	/ãtuzjazm/	/ãtuzjasm/	<i>enthousiasme</i>
		/idealizm/	/idealism/	<i>idéalisme</i>
		/sɔsʒalizm/	/sɔsʒalism/	<i>socialisme</i>



Register marked in treatment of	R1 and example		R2+R3	written form
vowels: confusion of e-sounds	/ə/ → /e/	/rekɔ̃stitɥe/	/rəkɔ̃stitɥe/	<i>reconstituer</i>
		/reose/	/rəose/	<i>rehausser</i>
	/e/ → /ə/	/rəbeljɔ̃/	/rebeljɔ̃/	<i>rébellion</i>
	/e/ → /ɛ/	/ʒ pø vu lasyre/ /dəgre/ (Parisian)	/ʒə pø vu lasyre/ /dəgre/	<i>je peux vous l'assurer degré</i>
treatment of mute e	/ɛ/ → /e/	/me/	/mɛ/	<i>mais</i>
		/frâse/	/frâse/	<i>français</i>
		/rezɔ̃/	/rezɔ̃/	<i>raison</i>
	pronounced	/apəle/	/aple/	<i>appeler</i>
	where	/âseɲmə̃/	/âseɲmə̃/	<i>enseignement</i>
	normally	/evenəmā/	/evenmā/	<i>événement</i>
	silent	/mêtəñā/	/mêtñā/	<i>maintenant</i>
	silent where	/fra/	/fəra/	<i>fera</i>
	normally	/frɔ̃/	/fəɔ̃/	<i>feront</i>
	pronounced	/fzɛ/	/fəzɛ/	<i>faisait</i>
lengthening of /a/ confusion of o-sounds	introduction	/arkə də	/ark də	<i>Arc de</i>
	of /ə/	trijɔ̃f/	trijɔ̃f/	<i>Triomphe</i>
		/avəkə/	/avək/	<i>avec</i>
		/lɔ̃rsəkə/	/lɔ̃rskə/	<i>lorsque</i>
		/gɑ̃to/	/gato/	<i>gâteau</i>
		South- ern	/otr/	<i>autre</i>
	/o/ → /ɔ/		/o ʃod/	<i>eau chaude</i>
			/sote/	<i>sauter</i>
			/voʒ/	<i>Vosges</i>

Liaison – the phenomenon which, in closely linked groups of words, causes the normally silent final consonant of a word to be sounded before the initial vowel of the next word – may also be affected by considerations of register. However, first of all it should be stressed that in certain circumstances liaison is compulsorily applied and in others it is prohibited; in other words all speakers, regardless of their normal register of speech, are obliged to observe these rules of liaison, as briefly illustrated in the following table:

	circumstance	examples
liaison compulsory	between qualifier + noun	<i>ses amis</i> /sez ami/ <i>deux ans</i> /døz ɑ̃/ <i>de grands arbres</i> /də grɑ̃z arbr/
		NOTE: an adjective ending in a nasal vowel is denasalised in liaison and is

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	circumstance	examples	
<b>liaison compulsory</b> ( <i>cont.</i> )		pronounced like the corresponding F form: <i>le prochain arrêt</i> : /lə prɔʃɛn arɛ/	
	between pronoun + verb/ verb + pronoun	<i>elles ont</i> <i>nous avons</i> <i>allez-y</i>	/ɛlz ɔ̃/ /nuʒ avɔ̃/ /alez i/
	between monosyllabic adverb or preposition + article, noun, pronoun adjective or adverb	<i>sous une chaise</i> <i>moins utile</i> <i>plus important</i>	/suz ɥn ʃez/ /mwâz ytil/ /plyz ẽ pɔrtâ/
	after the conjunction (not interrogative) <i>quand</i>	<i>quand il vient</i>	/kât il vjẽ /
	after the following words ending in a nasal vowel: <i>en, on, un, mon, ton, son, bien, rien</i>	NOTE: partial denasalisation occurs with <i>en, on, un, mon, ton, son</i> , the degree of denasalisation depending upon a variety of factors (eg register, place of origin): <i>mon ami</i> /mɔ̃n ami/ or /mɔn ami/ This does not apply to <i>bien</i> and <i>rien</i> : <i>bien indisposé</i> is always /bjẽn ẽ dispɔz/. 	
<b>liaison prohibited</b>	before numeral beginning with a vowel	<i>les onze</i> <i>cent un crayons</i>	/le ɔ̃z/ /sã œ krejɔ̃/
	after <i>et</i>	<i>et alors</i>	/e alɔr/
	before <i>oui</i>	<i>mais oui</i>	/mɛ wi/
	between singular subject + verb	<i>le soldat est parti</i>	/lə solda ɛ parti/
	after words ending in a nasal vowel not specified above	<i>selon eux</i> <i>bon à rien</i>	/səlɔ̃ ø/ /bɔ̃ a rjẽ/
		NOTE: however, when <i>bon à rien</i> is a noun, liaison occurs	
	before words with aspirate <i>h</i>	<i>un héros</i> <i>le hibou</i>	/œro/ /lə ibu/
		NOTE: R1 speakers tend to disregard the aspirate <i>h</i> in: <i>les handicapés</i> <i>les haricots</i> <i>les Hollandais</i>	