Language and situation: register

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Language is sensitive to its context of situation

[…] language varies not just according to who we are [the relations between language varieties, groups, affiliation], but also according to the situation in which we find ourselves. This latter type of variation is traditionally approached through the concept of register, sometimes also being referred to as stylistic variation. The basic notion is that any given instance of language is inextricably bound up with its context of situation and that different types

of situation require us to handle the language differently. The sensitivity of language to its context of situation is so strong that we can often recover features of the context from very small – almost trivial – examples. For instance, many readers will feel confident that they can reconstruct the different contexts of situation for the following utterances:

1. ‘I’m going to give you a prescription for the pain.’
2. ‘Cream together butter, sugar and beaten yolks until smooth.’
3. ‘New Tubifast. The tubular dressing retention bandage. sticking. No tying. No pinning.’
4. ‘Beauty of Velvet at truly Budget Prices. In 16 colours. Send now for full details and actual fabric samples.’

**Register**

The notion of *register* helps to clarify the interrelationship of language with context by handling it under three basic headings – *field*, *tenor* and *mode*.

**Field**

Where utterances are embedded in an ongoing activity so that they help to sustain and shape it, then the notion of *field* refers to the activity itself. An utterance such as:

6. ‘scalpel… clips… swab here’ would have as its field the activity of a surgical operation; whereas an utterance such as:

7. ‘This is alpha romeo tango requesting clearance to proceed to runway one, over’ would have as its field the activity of taxiing an aircraft.

Not all instances of language are so closely embedded in an ongoing set of actions, since utterances (spoken or written) may be concerned with a topic or subject matter (ranging from ‘last night’s TV programme’ to ‘sub-atomic physics’) quite remote from the immediate circumstances in which they are produced. In such cases the notion of *field* refers not so much to an ongoing activity but to the subject matter of the text. In the following piece of newspaper text the *field* may be summed up as ‘party politics in the United Kingdom’:

8. ‘With Tory divisions over Europe so deep, any new leader could split the party still further.’

The field, therefore, may vary from being *intrinsic* to the text, as in the last example, or, *extrinsic* to the text in the case of examples of activity-based talk ((6)-(7), above).
Technical, specialized and field-specific vocabularies
The particular aspect of language most affected by the field is probably the lexis or vocabulary. As pointed out above, specialized vocabularies do emerge from specific fields, so that items such as ‘software’, ‘self-drive’, ‘peripherals’, ‘data-storage’, ‘floppy-disk’, are probably exclusive to fields related to computing. (pp. 107-108) […]

**Tenor**
Whereas the field corresponds loosely to what a text is about, tenor refers to the kind of social relationship enacted by the text. The notion of tenor, therefore, highlights the way in which linguistic choices are affected not just by the topic or subject matter of communication but also by the kind of social relationship within which communication is taking place. […]

The aspects of social relationship most crucial under the heading of tenor include politeness, degrees of formality, and the relative statuses of participants; and these dimensions of interpersonal relations affect a whole range of linguistic choices. (p. 109)
Forms of personal address
[...] The choice of one or other form is motivated not just by how many people are addressed, but also by a sense of personal familiarity versus social distance, the singular form being used to invoke intimacy and the plural form being used to register a sense of formality and distance. Thus, the tenor of the social relationship is reflected in the choice of personal pronouns. (p. 110) […]

**Mode**
In addition to considerations of topic and social relationship, language is also sensitive to the means adopted for communication. These have varied in a astonishing variety of ways across different cultures and between different historical periods, ranging from tables of stone and marks of papyri to smoke signals and drum beats. The principal distinction within mode is between those channels of communication that entail immediate contact and those that allow deferred contact between participants. The prime instance of this distinction in our culture is that between speech and writing. (p. 112) […]

**Conclusion**
[...] language varies not just according to who we are but also according to the situations in which we find ourselves. We have seen in some detail how closely language is tied to its social context, so that certain linguistic choices - of grammar as well as vocabulary – seem naturally appropriate to
certain contexts, while others do not. Contexts have associated with them, we might say, repertoires of linguistic choice. This is not an elaborate way of saying that we have to choose the right word to match the occasion. For what the notion register implies is that context of situation consist of options for meaning. The fact that some wordings are more appropriate than others in particular contexts reflects a deeper underlying difference: that contexts differ fundamentally in the kind of meanings they allow (p. 125).

**NDLR : Annexe**

La perspective de Montgomery est à rapprocher des orientations théoriques de l’ethnolinguiste nord américain Dell Hymes, comme on peut le voir dans la citation suivante : « Forms of speech. A major theoretical and empirical problem is to distinguish the verbal resources of a community. […] Three criteria seem to require recognition at the present time: the historical provenience of the language resources ; presence or absence of mutual intelligibility ; and specialization in use. The criteria often do not coincide. Language and dialect are suggested for the first ; codes for the second ; and varieties and register for the third. […] Register has become familiar in English linguistic usage for reference to specific situations ; varieties or "functional varieties", has been used in American linguistics in relation to broad domains (e.g., vernacular vs. standard). […] Genres. By genres are meant categories such as poem, myth, tale, proverb, riddle, curse, prayer, oration, lecture, commercial, form letter, editorial, etc. From one standpoint the analysis of speech into act is an analysis of speech into instances of genres. The notion of genre implies the possibility of identifying formal characteristics traditionally recognized. […] [problem of unmarked casual speech] […] Genres often coincide with speech events, but must be treated as analytically independent of them. » (p. 65) (« Models of the Interaction of Language and Social Life », in J. Gumperz and D. Hymes, 1972, Directions in sociolinguistics, The Ethnography of Communication, pp. 35-71)

Elle est bien sûr proche de celles du linguiste britannique Michael Halliday, fondateur de l’Ecole de linguistique systémique : « 2.3 Register. The term ‘register’ was first use in this sense, that of text variety, by Reid (1956) ; the concept was taken up and developed by Jean Ure (Ure and Ellis 1972), and interpreted within Hill’s (1958) ‘institutional linguistic’ framework by Halliday et al. (1964). The register is the semantic variety of which a text may be regarded as an instance. […] A register can be defined as the configuration of semantic resources that the member of a culture typically associates with a situation type. It is the meaning potential that is accessible in a given social context. Both the situation and the register
associated with it can be described to varying degrees of specificity; but the existence of registers is a fact of everyday experience – speakers have no difficulty in recognizing the semantic options and combinations of options that are ‘at risk’ under particular environmental conditions. Since these options are realized in the form of grammar and vocabulary, the register is recognizable as a particular selection of words and structures. But it is defined in terms of meanings; it is not an aggregate of conventional forms of expression superposed on some underlying content by ‘social factors’ of one kind or another. It is the selection of meanings that constitutes the variety to which a text belongs. » (pp. 110-111) (Language as Social Semiotic. The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning, 1978, University Park Press, London, Baltimore, 256 p.)

Le point de vue de ces deux auteurs est donc « local », centré sur une situation particulière. Une approche historique des registres (une accumulation de textes par exemple) semble absente. Le registre est un usage de la langue en situation spécifique (Hymes). Halliday insiste pour sa part sur le caractère sémantique du registre : les ressources sémantiques mobilisables par un locuteur d’une culture donnée, qu’il associe à un type de situation, un contexte particulier. Le registre, fait d’expérience quotidienne, se reconnaît par la sélection caractéristique de mots et de structures, mais reste défini en terme de significations.