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A typology of language registers

Une typologie des registres de langues

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Foreword

ISO (the International Organization for Standardization) is a worldwide federation of national standards bodies (ISO member bodies). The work of preparing International Standards is normally carried out through ISO technical committees. Each member body interested in a subject for which a technical committee has been established has the right to be represented on that committee. International organizations, governmental and non-governmental, in liaison with ISO, also take part in the work. ISO collaborates closely with the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) on all matters of electrotechnical standardization.

The procedures used to develop this document and those intended for its further maintenance are described in the ISO/IEC Directives, Part 1. In particular the different approval criteria needed for the different types of ISO documents should be noted. This document was drafted in accordance with the editorial rules of the ISO/IEC Directives, Part 2 (see www.iso.org/directives).

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For an explanation on the voluntary nature of standards, the meaning of ISO specific terms and expressions related to conformity assessment, as well as information about ISO's adherence to the World Trade Organization (WTO) principles in the Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) see the following URL: www.iso.org/iso/foreword.html.

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

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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

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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

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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.

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