

WORKING WITH REGISTER IN THE CLASSROOM: THE SPANISH CASE

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1. The concept of register: a review

The broad notion of language variety and the associated one of register have been produced by an area of research that has particularly developed in the last few decades. This is specially due to the work of a number of linguists, including for example Halliday, who have been interested in the fact that language changes according to the contexts of its use as well as the characteristics and purposes of its users.

Catford dedicates Chapter 13 of his work *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* to the issue of language variety:

The concept of a "whole" language is so vast and heterogeneous that it is not operationally useful for many linguistic purposes... It is, therefore, desirable to have a framework of categories for the classification of "sublanguages" or varieties. A language variety is a subset of formal and/or substantial features, which correlates with a particular type of socio-situational feature (1965: 84).

In *Language Structure and Translation* (1975: 183), Nida also pointed out its importance:

Translation involves much more than finding corresponding words between two languages. In fact the words are only minor elements in the total discourse. In many respects the tone of a passage (that is, the style of the language) carries far more impact, and often even much more meaning, than the words themselves.

Traditionally Linguistics has been primarily concerned with the identification and formal analysis of relatively small segments of language. Only recently have linguists begun to consider seriously the ways and contexts in which language is actually used, in an attempt to recognise other kinds of linguistic patterning than those within sentence boundaries.

The principle of variation is intrinsic to language. "No human being talks the same way all the time..." (Hymes 1984: 44). One kind of variation noticed very early in history is the way people differ in their speech and writing depending on

where they come from or where they belong in their society. This type of social variation is defined *dialect*.

There is also a functional kind of variation, i.e. the linguistic difference that correlates with different occasions of use. People speak differently depending on whether they are addressing someone older or younger, of the same sex or opposite sex, etc.; whether they are taking part in a sports event or a courtroom case, and so on. Such functional variation is what can be called *register*.

Register is a wide-ranging term. Broadly speaking, a register is, therefore, a language variety viewed with respect to its context of use. According to *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (Crystal 1991), register "refers to a variety of language defined according to its use in social situations".

Nothing about the concept of *register* is to be found in the works of such early linguists as Saussure or Bloomfield, mainly interested in abstract and general topics.

Interest in register variation grew from the merging of situational, social and descriptive analyses by anthropological linguists such as Malinowski or Firth.

An important early study focusing on situational variation is Malinowski's (1923: 296-336) discussion of the context of situation. He tried to describe to an English-speaking public the way of life of a group of South-East Pacific islanders through a translation of a series of transcribed texts with the support of an extended commentary. By placing texts within their environments, he provided information not only about the immediate situation in which they were uttered (*context of situation*) but also about the underlying total cultural background (*context of culture*), both crucial to the interpretation of the text.

The context-of-situation concept was further elaborated by Firth, who studied meaning in terms of how language works in a context. He developed a series of variables which are always present in the context of situation with a view to a meaningful interaction: for example, the participants in a situation, the action taking place or the effect of that action.

Firth also refers to what might be seen as a possible equivalent of *register*, i.e. the *restricted language*, "serving a circumscribed field of experience or action" and having "its own grammar and dictionary" (1957: 87; 98). *Restricted languages* included such domains as "science, technology, politics, sport", etc., or "a type of work associated with a single author or a type of speech with its appropriate style" (1968: 98; 112). Each person is "in command of a constellation of restricted languages [...] but these are governed by the general language of the community" (1968: 207).

Equally relevant to the question of register is Firth's notion of *collocations*, the study of "pivotal words, leading words [...] in the company they usually keep" (1968: 113). There may be "general or usual collocations and more restricted technical or personal [ones]; [...] "characteristic distributions in

collocability [could represent] a level of meaning in describing the English... of a social group or even one person" (1968: 195).

It was Halliday, a pupil of Firth, who eventually spread the term *register* as such, i.e. "a variety according to use, in the sense that each speaker has a range of varieties and chooses between them at different times" (Halliday, MacIntosh & Strevens 1964: 77). Register is therefore employed to say different things, to communicate different meanings in line with the type of social activity under way.

In another line of thought, registers could be seen as something acquired during socialization with discourse types (van Dijk & Kintsch 1983: 57). People often command registers that they could not describe properly, let alone in the framework of a theory. Everyone knows that certain registers are to be used with family and friends but not in a setting of a written examination. How people know this and how they put it into practice is rather an intuitive issue.

2. Register in the classroom

If we assume that in all natural languages speakers are able to adapt themselves verbally to different situations, students of foreign languages should develop a conscious recognition of both the mechanisms of adaptation and the differences between these mechanisms from one language to another.

If we are to teach students, for example, how to handle a business situation (let us suppose in Spanish), how to operate in a business context, they should know the language of Spanish business texts; this in turn will involve developing in them an understanding of how business texts function in society; how business texts are produced; how business discourse relates to the Spanish language as a whole and how register-specific are the linguistic structures of business discourse.

For language teachers to develop this process of recognition in their students, the teachers themselves need a model that shows systematically how text is related to context. One of the most influential models is that of Halliday (1978: 142), who believes that the question is

[...] one of characterizing the context of situation in appropriate terms to reveal the systematic relationship between language and the environment. This involves some form of theoretical construction that relates the situation simultaneously to the text, to the linguistic situation and to the social system."

Halliday distinguishes three variables that collectively determine the functional variety or register of the language that is being used: FIELD, TENOR and MODE.

The *field* is the social action in which the text is embedded, in other words, what is going on, in a particular setting of space and time. It also includes what the interaction is about (the subject-matter) and what the participants know about it (shared knowledge). We therefore have legal scientific or technical registers, the language of sports and so on.

The *tenor* is the relation between the participants involved, along a continuum of formality levels (from the least formal to the most formal). The social situation heavily affects the level of formality: acceptability and appropriateness vary according to the different situations. The translator/interpreter have to be aware of the peculiar conventions in the different cultures.

The *mode* concerns the role played by language: what exactly the language is achieving or being used to achieve. The mode includes the channel employed (spoken or written). Such opposition actually embraces a number of different possible situations; written texts can be read in silence or aloud, spoken texts can be spontaneous or prepared, and so on. For example, situations of written communication tend to give rise to a text having high lexical density, many lexical elements grouped together, embedded within a well-defined grammatical structure with main and subordinate clauses, etc. Oral texts, on the contrary, are characterized by tangled grammar, consisting of juxtapositions, repetitions, hesitations, reformulations.

Register, therefore, concerns the ways in which language works and meanings are activated in a given situation. The identification of register is crucial when it comes to the processing of a text: we can retrieve the context by looking at what has happened (field), who has taken part (tenor) and what channel has been chosen (mode).

According to Halliday, "every text is a context to itself. A text is characterized by coherence. It hangs together. At any point after the beginning, what has gone before provides the environment for what is coming next." (1985: 48). Internal expectations are therefore raised, accompanied with those brought by readers or listeners from outside sources, from the context of situation and of culture. Central to coherence is the contribution from *cohesion*, i.e. the set of linguistic resources that every language has for linking one part of a text to another. Cohesion essentially concerns forms of relation beyond sentence boundaries. Within the sentence there are already grammatical criteria governing the way units are structured.

Fundamental to an understanding of cohesion is the notion of a "tie". Consider the following example:

Después de marcar los números 07, espere el tono de llamada internacional. Una vez recibido dicho tono, marque el código del país...

Clearly "dicho tono" in the second sentence refers back to "el tono de llamada internacional" in the first. This back reference gives cohesion to the two sentences and enables us to interpret them as a whole, so that the two together constitute a text or part of a text.

Halliday and Hasan have identified the following five kinds of cohesive tie:

- Reference: *¿Has visto a José? Tengo que hablar con él.*
 Substitution: *Si quieres trabajar con el ordenador, tendrás que comprar uno.*
 Ellipsis: *¿Te vas de vacaciones? No puedo.*
 Conjunction: *Clara se fue, pero no logró llegar a tiempo.*
 Lexical cohesion: *Ana decidió aparcar. Acercó el coche a la acera y apagó el motor.*

Probably the most interesting kind of tie for didactic purposes is that provided by lexical cohesion since it is primarily with lexis that there is more scope for exploiting the notion of register.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) suggest two major categories of lexical cohesion: reiteration and collocation. Underlying all five kinds of cohesive tie is the concept of presupposition: cohesion implies a process by means of which meanings are carried through a text by the systematic relationship of presupposed and presupposing items. In the case of lexical cohesion, in a text words are used in a variety of ways, either to hold constant cohesive links with an earlier reference item – by repetition or near repetition of that item – or to develop and extend it by exploiting a number of degrees of semantic relationships (e.g. synonymy: *casa – edificio*). Lexical reiteration is the category of lexical cohesion that covers those kinds of semantic relations that are most obviously systematic. The following four subcategories can be identified:

Se alquilan pisos

- 1) repetition of same item: *Los pisos son caros*
- 2) synonym or near synonym: *Los apartamentos son caros*
- 3) superordinate: *Las viviendas son caras*
- 4) "general" item: *El alojamiento es caro*

With reiteration we are dealing with fairly clear kinds of semantic relations. It can be agreed that in language learning, especially at advanced stages, students should be aware of these kinds of relations and acquire some skill in using them. Halliday and Hasan, however, refer to the need to take into account broader kinds of systematic lexical relationship when they say:

We can therefore extend the basis of the lexical relationship that features as a cohesive force and say that there is cohesion between any pair of

lexical items that stand to each other in some recognisable lexico-semantic (word-meaning) relation. (1976: 285)

Given so flexible a definition, not only can we handle such relations as antonymy (e.g. male-female) and complementarity (e.g. boy-girl), but also many other kinds of lexical patterns, falling within the spectrum of lexical collocation. Under this heading we have to deal with kinds of lexical relations that are more difficult to assign to systematic categories but which do nevertheless exhibit patterning and are of great importance in contributing to the texture and meaning of given texts. When lexical items that are related semantically occur in a text, especially when close to each other, we can expect them to be cohesive. In one of the previous examples (*Ana decidió aparcar, acercó el coche a la acera y apagó el motor*), when sequences occur such as *aparcar, coche, motor*, a cohesive effect results not because of the same kind of systematic relation as occurs in lexical reiteration but because such items tend to co-occur or collocate in the same linguistic environment. Lexical items that have the same collocational patterns, therefore, will produce a cohesive effect if they occur in adjacent sentences. Moreover, the longer the text and the greater the concentration of lexical material, the more likely it is that quite long cohesive chains will be set up stretching through whole texts on the basis of this kind of lexical relation.

Before students are expected to enter the booth, or even to summarize and translate difficult passages, they should be taught how to understand the ways in which text in general and particular kinds of text from specific registers function and especially how "meanings" are conveyed by language users. This can be done by carrying out analyses at various levels of elaborateness, for example, according to Halliday's model.

Moreover, as an extension of the work in register, students could be given exercises in understanding and manipulating the various kinds of semantic relations that can exist between lexical items. The attention could then be focussed on how cohesive ties can be used in order to transmit information clearly in both the foreign and own language (it is well known, for example, how relevant the understanding of ties is to consecutive interpretation). A typical exercise to be used with students consists of supplying them with a set of sentences (both in the foreign language and in mother tongue, at successive stages) related to an event they are familiar with. The task includes production of a coherent and cohesive text.

As far as language variety is concerned, a major problem lies in the fact that the very obvious character of a notion like register can be an obstacle to its proper exploitation. It is well known that politicians, football commentators, physicians, etc., have a special kind of language which they typically use in certain contexts. Students have to be made aware of the phenomenon in itself

and helped to acquire expertise in using some of these kinds of language appropriately. But how is this to be done? Not presumably by presenting students with texts designed to illustrate particular registers and merely noting the significant markers. This would become a rather tedious exercise in acquiring lexical taxonomies. An improvement on this would be to use such passages more productively, by preparing for example substitution exercises in which a registrally "marked" passage is reformulated in a neutral style. This would have the advantage of being an active exercise, though shifting to some extent the focus from the original learning point of register.

In conclusion, teachers of advanced language students can benefit in some ways from the work carried out in the area known as "text linguistics", shifting the attention away from the study of syntax to the study of language use and context.

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