



# Registers of Communication

Edited by  
Asif Agha and Frog

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# Preface

The present volume is the result of a multi-year initiative to bring together scholars from both sides of the Atlantic into an interdisciplinary dialogue on register phenomena. These efforts culminated in two Register Colloquia at the University of Helsinki. The first one, titled “Register: Intersections of Language, Context and Communication”, met during 23–25 May 2012. The second one, titled “Register II: Emergence, Change and Obsolescence”, met during 22–24 May 2013. The articles collected here are drawn from materials presented at these colloquia, including papers by keynote speakers and invited contributions from additional participants.

The Helsinki Register Colloquia were organized by the Department of Folklore Studies of the University of Helsinki and by the Academy of Finland research project “Oral and Literary Culture in the Medieval and Early Modern Baltic Sea Region: Cultural Transfer, Linguistic Registers and Communicative Networks” (2011–2014) of the Finnish Literature Society.

These colloquia brought together scholars from three continents and many fields for a series of rich and fruitful discussions that worked to span many disciplinary divides. Of course, our coming together as scholars was only a first step. Opening up a cross-disciplinary conversation – or any conversation – depends on language, and on frameworks within which that language is used. The Helsinki Colloquia offered a venue in which many frameworks and perspectives could be engaged and negotiated in a multidisciplinary fashion. The success of these conversations nonetheless depended on our recognition that all relevant terminologies and analytic frameworks are not always fully shared by all participants. In other words, rather than concern over a language-barrier in the conventional sense, we were concerned with overcoming the register-barriers that have developed between traditions of scholarship. This involved recognizing that register contrasts involved not just differences in lexicons or grammars, but were bound up with differences in larger frameworks for thinking about conduct and communication – theories, ideologies and valuations – which might also require “translation” or elucidation if communication was going to succeed. The challenge posed by communication also had another, positive side. The process of “translating” from the terminologies and frames of reference of one discipline into those

of another necessarily involved bridging distinct perspectives, and this process itself produced *new* perspectives on the ideas, concepts and data being “translated”, leading in turn to the development of new understandings and new knowledge.

The editors have worked actively with all contributors to improve the multidisciplinary accessibility of individual articles and to increase dialogue between them. Our multidisciplinary conversations have enabled the negotiation of new understandings of “register” both as a term and a concept, and these ideas have been carried forward from the Helsinki Register Colloquia into the articles that constitute this volume. It is our hope that a continuing dialogue with the perspectives of our readers may take this multidisciplinary conversation even further.

# Acknowledgements

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We would also like to thank David Elmer, Lauri Harvilahti and John Zemke for their help in organizing a suitable contribution by the late John Miles Foley, and Pennsylvania State University Press and Indiana University Press for their kind permission to reproduce relevant passages from Foley’s published work.

Finally, we would like to thank all of the many participants of the Helsinki Register Colloquia for the discussions and insights that are in the background of this collection and the work it presents.



# Introduction



## An Introduction to Registers of Communication

It may not be an exaggeration to say that our understanding of linguistic and other forms of human communication has advanced more during the 20th century than in any preceding period. Yet these changes did not occur all at once. Instead, different levels of organization within communicative conduct became focal objects of scholarly attention at different times. Earlier in the 20th century, research paradigms in many disciplines were dominated by approaches that favored abstract models of homogenous sign systems underlying the complexities of situated communication. A transformative shift began after the middle of the century, when scholarship began to turn from abstractable models to contextual and perspectival variation, from an exclusive focus on *langue*, defined as the object of linguistics by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), to the organization of *parole* into forms of situated language use within social practices. Attention to situated practices soon revealed that many features of *parole* rely on the tendency of language users to adapt the resources of *langue* in heterogeneous ways within specific varieties of communicative conduct. “Register” originated as a term to designate these varieties.

In recent decades, approaches to register phenomena have become central to many disciplines in Europe and North America. The present volume brings together work by anthropologists, folklorists, linguists, and philologists. The sixteen articles collected here represent approaches that have developed on both sides of the Atlantic. Many authors discuss the development of register studies in their own fields and employ analytic techniques developed within distinct disciplinary traditions. They focus on the register organization of a range of semiotic devices – whether grammatical units or prosody, whether lexical items or melodic contours, whether verbal signs or kinesic behaviors, whether spoken as utterances or circulated through script-artifacts. They describe models of communicative conduct in a variety of social practices and historical locales, and the range of phenomena they describe is far wider than those studied in early approaches to registers.

The epistemological limits of earlier approaches were shaped by the circumstances in which they emerged: as they began to explore situated discursive practices towards the middle of the 20th century, scholars continued,

ironically enough, to rely on *langue*-centric criteria for identifying registers, even as they tried to move beyond them. For instance, in an early use of the term “register” as a label for speech varieties, T. B. W. Reid identified differences in registers of speech and writing mainly by appeal to lexical or grammatical criteria, as if variation in language use involved nothing else, as if these dimensions of variation sufficed as criteria for reasoning about complex social practices; and although he linked observable facts of discursive variation to what – as he put it – may “roughly” be called “different social situations” (Reid 1956: 32), he lacked explicit criteria on how such “social situations” are distinguished from each other, or how utterances become linked to them, or for whom they do so, or when, or why. Other writers who took up aspects of Reid’s definition continued to link facts of discursive variation to “different situations” (Halliday, McIntosh & Stevens 1964: 87) or to “types of situation” (Hymes 1974: 440), but lacked explicit criteria on either identifying or characterizing such “types”, or specifying why only some differences among them mattered to speech variation while others did not. And so it was that early definitions of the term “register” were felt by contemporaries to lack “any precise and clear sense” (Hervey 1992: 191), and the lack of explicit criteria seemed to them to constitute “problems inherent” to its use in empirical research (Ferguson 1981: 10), so that many of them avoided the term altogether.

It is hardly surprising, however, that, in the intervening half-century, studies of register phenomena have moved well beyond the limitations of early work. The authors of the accompanying articles rely on a great many developments that differentiate the contemporary study of situated discourse from earlier efforts, and describe the developments on which they rely in their own articles. They describe a great variety of communicative signs (whether verbal or non-verbal, whether audible or visible) that are brought together into locale-specific models of communicative conduct, or *registers of communication*, whose signs are performed and construed in relatively symmetrical ways by persons acquainted with them, and enable them to interact with each other in specific social-interpersonal practices.

These articles are grouped into five thematically organized sections. The opening section brings together a few perspectives on these developments and orients the reader to the main issues that underlie recent developments.

### *Approaching Register Phenomena*

Although any perceivable behavior communicates something to someone who perceives it, not all such behaviors are organized as socio-centric models of communicative conduct, or as register models whose signs are performed and construed in comparable ways by a group of communicators. When such social-semiotic regularities do exist, they are identifiable only in the practices of those who treat them *as* a distinct register, and thereby comprise the social domain of its users. When semiotic registers are approached as locale-specific models of communication and as models-for specific social domains of users,

as in the accompanying articles, the initial point of departure for identifying them, and for differentiating them from other behaviors, is always the set of reflexive practices through which varied semiotic devices (such as the ones noted earlier or described below) are grouped together into models of significant conduct by those whose behaviors these are, where explicit ethnographic attention to *who* these persons are (as a group differentiable from others) also identifies the social categories of persons in whose lives the register enables a distinctive set of social practices. The identification of such models relies on a broad range of metasemiotic data that typify the form and significance of the behaviors they model. Such typifications explicitly or implicitly group specific behaviors together as comparable in indexical effects (and hence identifiable as repertoires of *that* register, and not of some other), and also clarify the indexical significance they have (such as the specific roles and relationships they clarify) for those who recognize and deploy these signs during communicative conduct.

These themes are taken up in the initial article in this section, where Asif Agha dialogically engages the articles collected together in this volume to show that despite the enormous variety of socio-historical locales in which these authors examine register formations – and whether the practices they study are the practices of Danish schoolchildren or Gaelic storytellers or Karelian lamenters or Latino migrants or Russian traders or any of the other social categories discussed in this volume – each one of these studies relies on specific forms of metasemiotic data as criteria that distinguish specific register partials from other behaviors, and clarify the indexical significance they have for communicators. Agha employs the term “enregisterment” to describe the reflexive process through which register formations are differentiated from each other and emerge as apparently bounded sociohistorical formations for their users. He offers a comparative discussion of how features of so-called “languages” and “genres” are unitized as signs of a register by the reflexive practices of their users. And he offers a comparative discussion of the metasemiotic criteria that make the sign-types of any given register segmentable from the totality of discursive and non-discursive behaviors that co-occur with register partials in any routine instance of performance.

In her lucid review of Halliday’s Systemic-Functional approach to register formations, Susanna Shore describes some of the developments that led to this early account of register formations. As Shore’s discussion makes clear, the Systemic-Functional approach remained focused (like other early approaches) on a grammar-centric conception of register variation, locating registers within what is described as a “Language System”. Halliday’s approach tended to rely on intuitive criteria for identifying registers, and to assume that registers identified by these criteria were bounded and stable phenomena. The Systemic-Functional approach nonetheless enabled scholars to conduct a number of early studies of register phenomena. Shore’s elegant description thus enables the reader to compare that approach with the other approaches employed by authors in this volume.

The section closes with Frog’s discussion of registers of oral poetry. The article describes how elements of a poetic register comprise indexically

significant units of different degrees of size and complexity. Frog illustrates how the form and indexical significance of signs of a poetic register tend to be genre-dependent. When verbal units become conventionally linked to indexing a particular symbolic element, their indexical values inform the meaning of the verbal unit. These devices are then used in combination with other devices to realize more complex units of communication in poetry, such as an epic story-pattern, in the same way that combinations of verbal material make a visual symbol recognizable.

Together, these three articles provide the reader with a good background for evaluating the themes and discoveries explored in later chapters.

### *Between Language and Register*

It has long been understood that the folk-term “language” does not denote a unitary phenomenon but encompasses a number of distinct kinds of semiotic regularities, such as the phonological and morphosyntactic organization of speech tokens, deictic systems that anchor utterances to occasions of use, varied types of contrasts that occur within a language (whether of dialect, genre or style), as well as ideas and ideologies that link a language as a whole to an imagined “language community” to which speakers feel they belong as social persons, often as members of sociopolitical formations like nation-states.

The articles in the second section of this volume, *Language Contact*, address the social construction and functions of register formations in multilingual environments. As we have already noted, early approaches to register phenomena tended to focus exclusively on the grammatical organization of communicative conduct, and thus on abstract “systems” (akin to Saussure’s *langue*) through which the organization of communicative conduct could be imagined. The question of how other features of a language (such as the ones just described) become linked to register contrasts that differentiate persons and practices from each other was not explicitly theorized or empirically studied in earlier approaches.

Contemporary approaches to register formations view abstract “systems” as obscuring the diversity of significant behaviors that are manifest during language use, and find that actually occurring forms of utterance contribute a far more diverse set of semiotic partials to register formations than abstract systems allow us to imagine. All of the articles in this section therefore begin with utterances as perceivable behaviors that occur in observable participation frameworks of embodied communication, and attempt to clarify the kinds of semiotic processes through which different aspects of the thing called “language” are organized or reorganized into specific register formations. They explore the ways in which discursive behaviors draw resources from each other. They examine the ways in which reflexive processes regroup some of the behaviors on which they draw into identifiable register models in communication. They explicitly describe the (sometimes implicit) metasemiotic practices that formulate features of utterance-acts as social indexicals for their users. Janus Spindler Møller’s article introduces J. Normann Jørgensen’s

In any society, communicative activities are organized into models of conduct that differentiate specific social practices from each other and enable people to communicate with each other in ways distinctive to those practices. The articles in this volume investigate a series of locale-specific models of communicative conduct, or registers of communication, through which persons organize their participation in varied social practices, including practices of politics, religion, schooling, migration, trade, media, verbal art, and ceremonial ritual. Drawing on research traditions on both sides of the Atlantic, the authors of these articles bring together insights from a variety of scholarly disciplines, including linguistics, anthropology, folklore, literary studies, and philology. They describe register models associated with a great many forms of interpersonal behavior, and, through their own multi-year and multi-disciplinary collaborative efforts, bring register phenomena into focus as features of social life in the lived experience of people in societies around the world.



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