

Reading Thick and Thin Registers

Overview. Register is a somewhat unstable notion. One can think of registers as simply specifying the formality of a speech situation or style, or as keyed to particular speech situations, or as having even more content that concerns the speaker’s relationship to their general social situation. This talk explores two such realizations of the concept of register, starting ‘thin’ and going ‘thicker.’ The thickening process proceeds by considering the interaction of language and norms of language use and allowing certain inferences drawn on the basis of that interaction to yield content about the speaker and the context of speech.

Thin register. The simplest idea of register takes it to be just a specification of formality. This formality could be that of a discourse context or of a piece of language, or collection of bits of language that together exhibit a similar formality level. Then appropriate speech can be understood as that speech whose formality level matches the formality level of the context: ie. speech whose register matches the contextual register. McCready (2019), a monograph-length work on the formal semantics of honorifics, spells out this idea formally by using real-numbered intervals between 0 and 1 to specify both the register (formality level) of lexical items and of the context of utterance. (These registers are derived from the factors conditioning polite speech in Iwasaki and Ingaphirom Horie (1995): social distance, interpersonal distance, and formality.)

Thus, for instance, the Javanese *sega* ‘rice (informal)’ is taken to have a register specification of $[0, .5]$, while *sekul* ‘rice (formal)’ is set at $[.5, 1]$. Since in this theory appropriate speech is defined as involving lexical content whose register level overlaps the contextual register, *sega* will be appropriate for any context overlapping $[0, .5]$, and *sekul* any overlapping $[.5, 1]$; that is, contexts involving informal registers in the first case and formal ones in the second (letting ‘informal’ refer to the lower half of $[0, 1]$ and ‘formal’ to the higher). This simple theory can be used to account for a large range of honorific use.

$$(1) \quad [[sega]] = \lambda x[rice(x)] \blacklozenge \mathcal{R} = [0, .5] : \langle e, t \rangle^a \times t^s$$

$$(2) \quad [[sekul]] = \lambda x[rice(x)] \blacklozenge \mathcal{R} = [.5, 1] : \langle e, t \rangle^a \times t^s$$

Thickening register. A theory like this is not appropriate for all cases of what looks like register-appropriateness in language. Consider such speech as cursing (e.g. with expressive adjectives: Potts 2005 a.m.o) and slurring (e.g. with the n-word: Anderson and Lepore 2010 a.m.o). It is not appropriate to curse or slur people in formal contexts, but it seems odd to say that curse words and slurs are

lexically specified for register in the same way that honorifics are. Rather, intuitively, words like these are inappropriate because of their particular content. In the case of slurs, their pejorative and derogatory character (Davis and McCready 2021) make them infelicitous in formal contexts, where restraint is called for; for expressive adjectives, one possible story is that the process of recovering their valence requires speakers to assume that they have sufficient knowledge of the hearer to know they will recover the intended meaning (McCready 2012), resulting in a violation of negative face (Brown and Levinson 1987).

But what is the status of this broader notion of register? The inappropriateness of these two examples is the result of norms of social interaction: not to insult others, not to assume too much about others, in general to treat others politely and without coming too close. These norms, of course, are routinely violated (or simply don't exist) in informal contexts. Assuming that the speaker is attentive to norms, their use of a slur or curse word indicates that they take themselves to be in an informal context; thus, given knowledge of norms, it becomes possible to infer the kind of context one is in, and so derive the register specification of nonlexically register-sensitive terms. Alternatively, given knowledge of the context and the observation that the speaker isn't following the relevant norms, we can conclude that the speaker doesn't care about them, and so draw conclusions about the speaker. The same style of analysis can be used to further enrich registers with social information if desired via the norm-based inferences drawable from the use of sociolinguistic indexical markers indicating such things as dialect, social group, and preferred self-presentation (Eckert 1989, Silverstein 2003, Burnett 2018).

Formal treatment. The theory of McCready (2019) is couched in terms of expressive content. Standardly, this kind of content is analyzed in terms of sets of contexts as in (3) as opposed to the sets of worlds used for vanilla content (Predelli 2013, Gutzmann 2015).

(3) $[[damn]] = \{C \mid C \text{ is in an emotionally excited state } E \text{ in } C\}$

The same kind of structures can be derived via norm-based inference by making use of self-location in contexts (cf. Kaplan 1989, Stalnaker 2012); use of a lexical item implies self-location in a context where that item is appropriate. The upshot is a representation of register information of the same form as the lexical representations proposed by McCready (2019), and therefore a unified account of these two means of arriving at register specifications, as well as the social positionings derived from indexical variables. The result is a family of theories of register useful for several distinct sorts of linguistic analysis.