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Formality vs. Style:

Standardization and Register in Conversational Prose

There are a great number of genres with their own rules within the realm of writing. For example, a poet, a novelist, and an academic may all be experts in their respective fields, but none of their work will alike; additionally, each of these writers may find it difficult—or even impossible—to write in a different genre. However, not all writing styles or genres have such permanent rules of adherence to standard English spelling, grammar, and syntax. One of these styles is conversational prose, or prose in which the author of the texts writes in the same style that they speak. Conversational prose tends to turn away from standard English writing rules; however, this genre cannot be fully standardized without stripping the writer of their style and viewing nonstandard register as justification for discrimination.

First, the terms "standardization" and "conversational prose" will be defined differently over the course of this project. "Standardization" typically refers to correct pronunciation, spelling, and syntax, mostly in spoken English. Here, "standardization" will be used to refer to the adherence to English spelling, grammar, and writing rules. Conversational prose, as stated earlier, is simply prose written in the style that mimics the way the author naturally speaks. This style is most commonly used in self-help books, Christian books, memoirs, autobiographies, etc.

The presence of traditional formality and standardization in English writing may be viewed on a spectrum. On one end is academic prose, or the style of writing that academics use in essays, reports, and so forth. This style is usually accredited with the highest standards of "proper" spelling, grammar, and syntax, going so far as to have numerous style guides depending

on the academic field. The other end of the spectrum contains poetry, which is notable for—and even expected to have—a sharp turn away from standard English writing rules. Poetry is easily recognized by its use of stanzas, rhyme scheme, and stretching of language. Since this is expected of its genre, poetry is usually labelled as "artistic," even with its lack of adherence to traditional formal standardization.

Conversational prose fits somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. This style contains most of the rules for standard English, yet is still viewed as more casual than academic prose. Conversational prose is more easily and harshly critiqued if it contains a complete lack of standard English. The question at hand is, how do writers and editors determine conversational prose's conformity to standard English without harming the intended style of the text or genre?

This debate between language and the purpose of the literature using that language is nothing new. In his "Introduction" to *The Taming of the Text,* Willie Van Peer writes that linguists and literary scholars have been in a state of "mutual mistrust, sometimes of contempt" since the 1960s (Van Peer 2). Van Peer explains that "literary scholars frown upon linguists and their methods because of their formalism. and their stubborn rationality. They feel that somehow the real 'literary' nature of the works studied is not done justice to" (Van Peer 2). Likewise, linguists "find fault with the looseness of terms and methods adopted by literary scholars, their superficial linguistic knowledge and their lack of system, as a result of which they also question the validity of conclusions arrived at in literary scholarship" (Van Peer 2).

Despite this conflict, Van Peer points out that "linguistic and literary analysis show (opposite) deficiencies" regarding the interchangeable overestimation and underestimation of "linguistic form" and "the influence of context" (Van Peer 8). Thus, it may be concluded that

despite their initial differences, literature and linguistics can be used in tandem for a better understanding of literary or linguistic analysis.

This intermarrying of disciplines to analyze or define different literature and other written work is further explored in *From Language to Creative Writing: An Introduction* by Philip Seargeant and Bill Greenwell. Seargeant and Greenwell explore many different examples of written work, including speech transcriptions, television scripts, public radio announcements, and poetry. Seargeant and Greenwell define linguistic terms with a deep study of "register" and "genre," and how these two areas overlap and affect each other.

Overall, Seargeant and Greenwell write, "Register is another way in which *how* something is said or written can be as important for the meaning of the message as *what* is said or written" (Seargeant and Greenwell 70). This definition introduces the multiplicity of register; more specifically, how this device is used as a toolkit, literary device, unifying device, and divider.

Register is ultimately a toolkit, especially in the nature of its linguistic definition. After describing register as a box of tools for different projects, Seargeant and Greenwell write, "If we want to get something done, we need to use the *correct* tool" (Seargeant and Greenwell 71). For instance, writers would not use the same register for a résumé that they would use for a novel. Résumés are expected to be brief and concise with an emphasis on someone's professional and educational experience. Novels, on the other hand, are expected to be lengthy and detailed with an emphasis on a fictional plot. Neither register would accomplish the goals of the other's genre.

Register is also a literary device used to distinguish one form of literature from another, even in creative writing and fiction. Readers expect something different from a book depending on whether the book is marketed as young adult fiction, fantasy, sci-fi, romance, etc.

As Seargeant and Greenwell explain, register is an effective unifying device in discourse communities. Seargeant and Greenwell cite John Swales to introduce his central elements of a discourse community: "the existence of a shared set of goals," using "an established mechanism of communication between members," implementing "a specialist vocabulary" and "particular genres of communication," and "members who have an expertise in this use of language" (Philip and Seargeant 78, Swales 24-7). Seargeant and Greenwell confirm that discourse communities "use a particular register of language as a result of their shared interest" (Seargeant and Greenwell 78). Discourse communities, then, may be viewed as the determiners of genre and the register to be used within that genre.

Discourse communities and the determination of genre and register are effective implementations of register as a unifying device. When taken too far, however, register may intentionally or unintentionally be used to create division within these communities. This means that when people are placed outside of their register, they feel inadequate, unequipped, and unconfident in their communicative environments (Seargeant and Greenwell 76). This division is often used to label the outlying member as an uninformed and unintelligent member who is not capable of communicating within the community. Unfortunately, this assigned identity may also extend past the barriers of the discourse community and be used to define the individual outlier as an uninformed and unintelligent person in general.

The problem with register as a means of division then lies at this exact risk: when one participant in a spoken or written conversation does not conform to the expected register of that conversation, then that individual is viewed as unintelligent, informal, and unable to participate in that conversation. This individual, however, may simply be using their own familiar register within the wrong genre.

The register-based stigma goes both ways. It is possible for an individual to view an entire genre as incomprehensible or unintelligent because that individual is viewing the genre with a conflicting register. For example, those who traditionally write academic prose may have difficulty comprehending or being comfortable with reading and writing conversational prose (depending on that academic's field of study). This does not mean that the text written in conversational prose is unintelligent. The conversational prose is simply portrayed in a separate register to accomplish goals for its respective genre.

The distinctions do not stop there; even within conversational prose, there are further divisions between genres, such as self-help books, Christian books, memoirs, autobiographies, and so forth. Nils Erik Enkvist addresses that this is simply a matter of style in his paper, "Styles as Parameters in Text Strategy." Enkvist writes that styles are used as "situation-bound modes of expression" since "people express themselves differently in different types of situations" (Enkvist 129). Some stylistic situations are "completely frozen," whereas others tolerate and even welcome "stylistic shocks," such as poetry (Enkvist 129).

Two more scholars combat the division that may arise when registers conflict. Michael Short, in his study "Speech Presentation, the Novel and the Press," writes: "To have a *properly general and robust theory of speech presentation, we need to examine a considerably wider range of text types and discoursal conditions* than has so far been the case" (Short 80, emphasis mine). Finally, Kathleen Wales enforces a more comprehensive study of literature in "Back to the Future: Bakhtin, Stylistics and Discourse." Wales writes:

> The avoidance of any empirical reality of the language is even more detrimental if it is employed in the study of literature . . . there are multitudes of voices and sociolects, dialects and idiolects, registers and styles to be heard. (Wales 176)

In conclusion, register can be used as a constructive tool or a divisive weapon in literature. This is especially true in conversational prose, which is usually seen as a type of gray area when it comes to adherence to formality and standardized English. The true division arises when readers from discourse communities who are nonnative to the genre of the text forget to shift their expectations of the writer's register. Conflict between discourse communities, genre, and expected register results in a misidentification of the text or author as unintelligent or incoherent. Readers and writers alike must be reminded that, especially in conversational prose, there is an expected variety of styles and registers that cannot all be defined by the same rules of standardization and formality.

Works Cited

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