

32nd International Conference of the Spanish Association of Applied Linguistics (AESLA):
Language Industries and Social Change

Family register in British English: The first approach to its systematic study

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Abstract

The present study looks into an unexplored area of research as it is the family register. An alternative to recording family conversations is the use of popular TV series, as their success lies in the audience's identification with their characters and their communicative style. This work analyses two highly popular series in UK. The results suggest that this register has its own communicative richness and internal variation, the knowledge of which may be of great help for students and professionals travelling to English-speaking countries and living or relating with native speakers in family environments.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Universidad Pablo de Olavide.

Keywords: Context variation; family register; language features; British English; communicative roles

1. Introduction

Register Variation (RV), as a communicative parameter, today ranges from simple and popularised binomials such as "formal" or "informal" language, to complex communicative parameters or dimensions difficult to understand and used by speakers outside the area of Linguistics. This heterogeneity and complexity has become an obstacle in the development of practical studies that could transfer their results to the educational and labour market.

The aim of the present study is to try to palliate this trend approaching RV from an all-inclusive and systematic perspective, but that is, at the same time, practical and "user-friendly" (Giménez-Moreno, 2006). This framework is

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based on a few principles that bring together the most significant insights of previous researchers in the area. Firstly, RV's key defining parameters are the communicative settings and the participants' roles, both conventional roles and intentional roles (Giménez-Moreno, 2011b). Secondly, in order to offer a comprehensive account of RV, this field needs to cover all daily communication, from professional to family settings, always keeping the notion of scale and proportion (Halliday, 1988). And finally, corpus analysis within this area needs to focus on searching for a practical set of registers and their distinctive language features, which allows prioritise native speakers' observation and collaboration on the methodological level (Giménez-Moreno and Skorczynska, 2013a).

Under this framework we observed a basic division between public and private life communication, and distinguished four basic macro-registers, two of them used in our public settings (professional and social registers) and other two used in our private life (amicable and family registers). Each of these registers can be expressed in at least three communicative tones: (i) more relaxed and flexible, (ii) neutral or conventional, and (iii) rigid and stereotyped tones (Giménez Moreno, 2006). Depending on their intentions, speakers might use one or several of these tones or shifts from one register to another (Giménez Moreno, 2011a). From this perspective the concepts of "formality" and "informality" are very relative since each register has its own scale of formality. The insights discovered through the analysis of the professional register (Giménez-Moreno, 2011a, 2011b; Giménez-Moreno & Skorczynska, 2013b) are now applied to approach the family register.

2. The "family register"

This register might easily be associated with the term "familect", first mentioned in Meurman-Solin (1999) with reference to the use of the Scottish dialect and its influence on the pronunciation of English within Scottish families. This term has also been used by specialists in Sociolinguistics, such as Crystal (2008) and the linguists from the University of Winchester involved in *The Kitchen Table Lingo*, to refer to the nonstandard terms and expressions that native speakers use in general informal settings. Some of these expressions about everyday communication within family environments have been compiled in slang and urban English dictionaries and reference tools such as *Slang Thesaurus* (Green, 1986) and *Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang* (Ayto & Simpson, 2010).

Additionally, interesting information can be found in studies on child-directed speech (CDS), informally referred to as "babytalk", "motherese" or "parentese" (Matychuk, 2004; Herrera et al., 2004). In family contexts, CDS is not just used with children but also with pets and among adults. In this latter case, it might have a positive function (e.g. flirtatious or caring), but sometimes it can be negative (e.g. derogatory and patronizing). Its main features are: specific childish words for family members and daily functions, diminutives, duplications, incomplete sentences, sign language, peculiar syntax and grammar (e.g. short verbs, nonverbal utterances, repetitions and omissions).

A fourth source of information is the art of argumentation and "modern rhetoric" (Gehrke, 2009). As Walton (2007) points out, persuasion, argumentation, dialectics and rhetoric are indispensable in understanding and analysing informal logic and reasoning. In this sense, the analysis of the family register is expected to contain a certain amount of rhetorical strategies, such as metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, understatement, euphemism, irony and puns.

Another key source of information is research on Conversational Analysis. Although this field covers many types of conversations, there are some studies which point out the key role of some conversational features in family communication (Couper-Kuhlen & Selting, 1996; Enfield & Stivers, 2007; Hutchby & Wooffit, 2008). These features include a peculiar use of prosody and intonation, person reference and other ordinary conversational devices such as humour, together with certain standard adjacency pairs.

Finally, recent research on television programs and dialogues deserves special mention, particularly when containing information related to family settings. For example, Bednarek (2010) analysed the language of fictional television focusing on TV series such as *Gilmore Girls*, and Quaglio (2009) contrasted the language of the American comedy *Friends* with natural conversation extracted from the Longman Grammar Corpus. A key insight is that their results support the fact that modern TV series mirror the core linguistic features of natural conversation.

All this collection of parameters and features related to the language used in family settings helped to design the methodology used for this study.

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