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# WORD CHOICE IN FORMAL AND INFORMAL ENGLISH: DIFFERENCES IN USAGE AND CONTEXT

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### Abstract

In this paper the differences between Formal and Informal English are discussed. Academic writing is often referred to as “formal”, but the teaching and assessment of formality can be challenging as formality has been conceptualised in many ways. A register variation is a variety of a language that is associated with extra-linguistic context. The relationship between a register and its context is functional: the linguistic features that make up a register are motivated by the needs and constraints of the communicative situation. Analysis shows that contrary to theorizing in variation sociolinguistics, probabilistic complexity differences between registers are not quantitatively simple: formal registers are consistently the most complex ones, while spoken registers are the least complex ones. 72 academic writing instructors were asked to rate the formality level of 60 short academic text excerpts on five-point scale. The excerpts were sampled from two publication types (university textbooks, journal articles) in three disciplines (psychology, biology, history). The results generally indicate that perceptions of formality can be explained by both linguistic features and situational characteristics.

**Keywords:** Formal English, informal English, academic writing, register variation, linguistic features, spoken registers, language variation, context, academic discourse, linguistic complexity, formality.

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### Аннотация

В данной статье обсуждаются различия между формальным и неформальным английским языком. Академическое письмо часто называют «формальным», но преподавание и оценка формальности могут быть сложными, поскольку формальность концептуализировалась по-разному. Вариация регистра — это разновидность языка, связанная с внеязыковым контекстом. Связь между регистром и его контекстом носит функциональный характер: лингвистические особенности, составляющие регистр, мотивированы потребностями и ограничениями коммуникативной ситуации. Анализ показывает, что, вопреки теориям в социолингвистике вариаций, вероятностные различия в сложности между регистрами не являются количественно простыми: формальные регистры неизменно являются наиболее сложными, в то время как устные регистры — наименее сложными. 72 преподавателя академического письма были опрошены по пятибалльной шкале, чтобы оценить уровень формальности 60 коротких академических текстов. Отрывки были взяты из двух типов публикаций (университетские учебники, журнальные статьи) в трех дисциплинах (психология, биология, история). Результаты в целом показывают, что восприятие формальности может быть объяснено как лингвистическими особенностями, так и ситуационными характеристиками

**Ключевые слова:** формальный английский, неформальный английский, академическое письмо, вариативность регистра, лингвистические особенности, разговорные регистры, языковая вариативность, контекст, академический дискурс, лингвистическая сложность, формальность.

### Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqolada rasmiy va norasmiy ingliz tili o'rtasidagi farqlar muhokama qilinadi. Akademik yozuv ko'pincha "rasmiy" deb ataladi, ammo rasmiyatchilikni

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o'rgatish va baholash qiyin bo'lishi mumkin, chunki rasmiyatchilik ko'p jihatdan kontseptsiyalangan. Registr o'zgarishi - bu tildan tashqari kontekst bilan bog'liq bo'lgan tilning xilma-xilligi. Registr va uning konteksti o'rtasidagi munosabat funksionaldir: registrni tashkil etuvchi lingvistik xususiyatlar kommunikativ vaziyatning ehtiyojlari va cheklovlari bilan turtki bo'ladi. Tahlil shuni ko'rsatadiki, variatsion sotsiolingvistika nazariyasidan farqli o'laroq, registrlar o'rtasidagi ehtimollik murakkabligi farqlari miqdoriy jihatdan oddiy emas: rasmiy registrlar doimiy ravishda eng murakkab, og'zaki registrlar esa eng murakkab bo'lganlardir. 72 akademik yozuv o'qituvchilaridan 60 ta qisqa akademik matn ekspertlarining rasmiyatchilik darajasini besh ballik shkala bo'yicha baholashlari so'ralgan. Ko'chirmalar uchta fan (psixologiya, biologiya, tarix) bo'yicha ikkita nashr turidan (universitet darsliklari, jurnal maqolalari) namunalar olindi. Natijalar, odatda, rasmiyatchilikni idrok etishni ham lingvistik xususiyatlar, ham vaziyat xususiyatlari bilan izohlash mumkinligini ko'rsatadi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** rasmiy ingliz tili, norasmiy ingliz tili, akademik yozuv, registrning o'zgarishi, lingvistik xususiyatlar, og'zaki registrlar, til o'zgarishi, kontekst, akademik nutq, lingvistik murakkablik, rasmiyatchilik.

### Introduction

Sometimes writing is challenging to study or teach in ESL/EFL. As mentioned by Grami (2010), writing is a skill that requires a lot of effort to develop because it is a complex psychological creation that involves critical thinking and discipline. Adolescent writers are required to know and utilise academic language as school activities get increasingly complicated throughout middle and high school to be successful in school (Nagy & Townsend, 2012). To participate in academic discourse, learners must have a large and complicated vocabulary as well as a thorough understanding of the academic register. As a result, both the breadth and depth of students' academic vocabulary are important factors

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contributing to the quality of their academic writing. Santos (1988) found that lexical weakness is a linguistic component that directly affects content. Academic writing is traditionally described as formal and impersonal (Matsuda & Nuri, 2020). Nonetheless, it has recently been observed that informality is gradually becoming a feature of academic writing along with formality (Boginskaya, 2023; Hyland & Jiang, 2019; Praminath et al., 2018; Adel, 2008; Chang & Swales, 1999). Several researchers (e.g., Yang & Pan, 2023; Leedahm, 2015; Mair, 1998) have recorded the occurrence of informal features in academic writing in different disciplines. This tendency is described as a “part of the contemporary zeitgeist” by Hyland and Jiang (2019: 217). Bresnan et al. (2007) explore the conditioning factors that constrain language users’ dative choices in American English conversations, as sampled in the Switchboard corpus of US American English (Godfrey et al., 1992). Bresnan et al. find that in that particular register and regional variety, variation between the two dative options is constrained by about 10 problematic constraints, including, for example, pronominality of the recipient or theme, discourse accessibility (pragmatics), constituent length, and animacy of the recipient. If, for instance, the recipient is inanimate (as the browser sends a connection request to the site) instead of animate (as in someone gives you a DVD), Bresnan et al.’s regression model predicts that the odds for the prepositional dative increase by a factor of about 4. This is the probabilistic effect that inanimate recipients have on dative choice in telephone conversations.

### Categories of Formal English

The concept of formality is essential to academic writing often suggesting how to write more formally (Chang & Swales, 1999; Dixon, 2022a; Hyland & Jiang, 2017). The construction includes an anticipatory *it* and an extraposed clausal subject (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1391). Considering the relationships among a text’s formality, linguistic features, and situational characteristics, it is recommended

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that the construct of formality be approached from a register-functional perspective in academic writing classes (Biber & Conrad, 2019; Biber et al., 2021). Sentence structure in formal English tends to be longer and more syntactically complex. Significant register variations with regard to the use of this construction have been noted in previous studies (e.g. Biber et al., 1999: 722; Groom, 2005; Kaatari, 2017). For instance, the construction has been found to be especially common in formal, academic discourse (Kaatari, 2016). Many studies have observed that learners struggle to achieve an appropriate level of formality in their writing (e.g. Altenberg & Tapper, 1998; Tapper, 2005). Researchers emphasize that formality is context-dependent and influenced by expectations and relationships. In register studies, the dominant approach is text-linguistic in nature, and special one – Multidimensional analysis (e.g., Biber 1988; Biber & Conrad, 2012). This type of analysis designed to investigate the functional relationship between linguistic variation and the situational context. Registers are identified based on co-occurrence patterns of linguistic features in corpus texts.

### Characteristics of informal English

One of the main features of informal English is the use of shortened forms of words, such as help, buy, get, and ask, instead of long formal equivalents like assist, purchase, obtain, and inquire. Also, contractions (don't, can't, it's), phrasal verbs (give up, look into, find out), and idiomatic expressions are used widely in our daily conversation. Using informal speech is easier because of its flexibility and the frequency of change driven by modern technologies and culture. Chatting online, people frequently use abbreviations such as LOL, BTW or gonna.

Informality in academic writing can be identified by set of features which have a high chance of co-occurrence. One approach to identifying related features is Biber's (1988) multidimensional corpus analysis of spoken and written texts. The correlational statistical technique known as factor analysis shows how 16 major grammatical categories typically co-occur in five dimensions of variation. Based

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on the extensive text-linguistic literature employing MD analysis, the Register-Functional (RF) approach to grammatical complexity (Biber et al., 2021a) draws inspiration from the inherent variation in human language. Also text-linguistic variation has a functional-contextual basis.

First and second person pronouns, unattended reference and sentences beginning with conjunctions or conjunctive adverbs comprise the majority of features, according for 97,3% of all informal elements in 1965 and 94,3% in 2015. First person pronouns, often considered the defining marker of informality, account for much of the increase in informal features with 45% overall growth during the period.

Norwegian students reported their extensive use of English in informal contexts outside of school, largely involving digital technology. Although all students used English for gameplay, their engagement with online games varied widely. One student, who used the nickname Gina, explained that she only gamed on her boyfriend's computer when visiting him. In contrast, five male students considered themselves serious gamers. Each reported playing more than five hours daily. They spent considerable time in gamer affinity spaces. First is Mats, who considers himself a serious gamer because he won. Another student is Edward, who was an avid gamer and streamer. He often broadcasts in English on YouTube and Twitch.

The term affinity space was coined by Gee and defined as: a place (physical, virtual, or mixture of the two) wherein people interact with each other, often at a distance (that is, not necessarily face-to-face, though face-to-face interactions can also be involved), primarily through shared practices or a common endeavour (which entails shared practices), and only secondarily through shared culture, gender, ethnicity, or face-to-face relationships. (2004:98) In this context, Brevik (2019) identified three common language profiles relating to teenagers' interests and passions outside school: "gamers" – use English for online gaming, "surfers" – use English to find information on the internet and "social media users" – use

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English on social media platforms. Each of these can be related to an affinity space: for instance, gamers are labelled “gamers” because they know about gaming, identify as gamers and participate in gamer communities through the use of English.

### Word Choice and Register Variation

Word choice has long been the subject of statistical analysis. Regularities, such as the lognormal model of word frequencies (Herdan, 1960; Mandelbrot, 1953, 1961; Carroll, 1971), have been identified and described. Indeed, written language development is often described using lexical measures of children’s vocabulary narratives (Wood et al., 2020). Increasing knowledge of academic vocabulary has been shown to contribute to high-quality writing (Lawrence, White, & Snow, 2010; Lesaux et al., 2010; Myhill, 2009), and children’s awareness of academic language develops towards increased vocabulary knowledge and depth of knowledge of words (Lesaux et al., 2010; Townsend & Collins, 2009). Good writing in Myhill’s (2009) study was statistically significantly associated with the use of longer words which were often sophisticated words of Greek or Latin origin.

A study by Pratiwi (2016) indicates students’ challenges in writing English related to language use. It shows that students need to increase their capacity to select the language relevant to their writing topic. Students had difficulty choosing their vocabulary; thus, they should practice writing in English to improve it. It is crucial to pay attention to the tense, vocabulary, and punctuation. Brun-Mercer and Zimmerman (2015) find that encouraging students to use a learner’s dictionary ensures that a term is acceptable for the target genre. Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary.

According to Basma (2013), the issue of learning writing skills is receiving increasing attention in university education programs. Because writing is such an important skill to prepare students for their future careers, they must

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communicate information and ideas. A study by Basma (2013) highlighted the significance of word choice in academic writing and proposed a solution. Students should increase their vocabulary and their capacity to select words relevant to their writing.

Informal English	Formal English
Get	Obtain
Buy	Purchase
Ask	Inquire
Help	Assist
Start	Commence
End	Terminate
A lot of	Numerous
Find out	Discover
Give	Provide
Set up	Establish
Place	Location
Workmate	Colleague
Money	Funds
Tell	Inform

### Conclusion

In general, this article is a compilation of scientific research on the functions and features of formal and informal English. Along with changes in the language, there are changes in its various departments, in particular, in its stylistics. A person in modern society should have knowledge of stylistics to communicate with representatives of different cultures and social groups without the challenges of misunderstandings. It is crucial for students to be able to express their thoughts, both orally and in writing, given the worldwide use of English. We cannot use slang or local expressions everywhere. That is why it is essential to know the difference between formal and informal language.

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