

# UNIT 3: LANGUAGE VARIATION AND SOCIAL PURPOSE

## AREA OF STUDY 1 – INFORMAL LANGUAGE

### OVERVIEW

#### OUTCOME

On completion of this unit the student should be able to *identify* and *analyse* distinctive features of informal language in written and spoken texts

#### KEY KNOWLEDGE

You will need to understand the:

- Relationship between the *context* and the *features* of language in informal texts.
- Differences in the *nature* and *functions* of formal and informal texts.
- Role of Standard and non-Standard English in creating formal and informal texts.
- Role of *discourse features* and *lexical choice* in creating *cohesion* and *coherence* in informal written texts.
- Use of various *stylistic features* in informal speech and writing:
  - Phonological patterning
  - Syntactic patterning
  - Morphological patterning
  - Lexical choice and semantic patterning
- Use of features of spoken discourse and major discourse strategies by speakers and the ways in which cooperation can be achieved.
- Use of informal language for various *social purposes*:
  - Encouraging intimacy, solidarity and equality
  - Maintaining and challenging positive and negative face needs
  - Promoting linguistic innovation
  - Supporting in-group membership
- Conventions for the transcription of spoken English texts, including symbols, legend, and line numbers.
- Metalanguage to discuss informal language in texts.

## VARIATIONS IN LANGUAGE

Language varies according to the person **who** uses it and to whom. Individuals who use language have different characteristics and include aspects of the user such as:

Language use varies in different situations (**when**). Irrespective of who uses language, it is likely to be different when used in a:

It is also likely that language used will be different depending on what we use (**why**) it for:

Finally, based on **who** uses language, **when** it is used and **why** it is used, there will be variations in **what** language is used (phonological, morphology, lexicology, syntax, semantics, style and the overall structure of the discourse).

## REGISTER

Refers to social variation in language. It can refer to the difference in *style* – difference in formal and informal language. It is the choice that the language user makes depending on language use. Register is related to the use of language (lexicon, syntax, intonation, semantic intent) and specific content that creates a social and psychological distance between the speaker and the audience. It reflects the **degree** of that social distance we wish to have with others in specific settings.

## SOCIOLINGUISTIC VARIABLES

As language users we make decisions about the kinds of language we use – often subconsciously. We think about who we will be addressing (**audience**) and the kind of relationships we need to create. We also assess the formality or informality of the occasion (**context**) and the reason for the speech or writing (**purpose**). We then make lexical choices that reflect our assessment of the linguistic situation. Hence, we as individuals use a wide range of language forms to serve various purposes – with friends we are informal and familiar; with employers or teachers we are more likely to be more polite and formal.

## STANDARD ENGLISH (SE)

Standard English is a form of English which has been accepted as a norm; a variety of language, some argue, that all speakers of a language should strive to use. It is also the variety of English with which other varieties of English are compared. Standard English is a variety of language which is used in academic, government and religious settings, and is often associated with the written mode. For these reasons, it is considered to be a prestigious variety. Hence, Standard English is seen as 'the' language and any differing ways of speaking and writing – often the varieties that are linked to particular speech groups or less powerful social groups – is seen as 'deviant' or 'substandard', thereby attracting negative attitudes not only to the language but also the speakers.

(**NOTE:** As language students, it is advisable that you use the term 'non-standard' as a more suitable and appropriate term than the loaded term 'substandard')

## ACCENT

While Standard English provides a norm for describing language variations in terms of vocabulary and grammar, the term **RECEIVED PRONUNCIATION (RP)** – sometimes referred to as the *Queen’s English* or *BBC English* – provides a standard form of pronunciation for all varieties of English. It is socially associated with respectability, good education and high social status. It is also the accent that is taught to English as Second Language speakers.

## ATTITUDES TO THE VARIETIES OF ENGLISH

There are two distinct approaches to language: *prescriptivism* and *descriptivism*.

As the terms suggest, *prescriptivists* believe that English is governed by a set of rules and everyone should use it because it is the ‘correct’ and ‘proper’ English. Since they believe that a form of English is the ‘best’, they do not welcome language change. Language change is seen as a form of language decay which erodes standards and leads to a corrupt form of English.

On the other hand, *descriptivists* observe language as it is spoken or written in different situations. They describe language and its variations according to the user, the use and the context. Since they see language as something that constantly evolves, they welcome language change.

## POLITENESS AND FACE NEEDS

### POLITENESS

Politeness is the term we use to describe the relationship between *how something is said* to an addressee and that addressee’s judgment of *how it should be said*. It refers to whatever *means* are employed to display *consideration of one’s addressee’s feelings (face)*, regardless of the social distance between the speaker and the addressee. It also refers to behaviour which actively expresses *positive concern* for others, as well as *non-imposing behaviour*.

### FACE NEEDS

We all have certain needs and two of these are the:

- Need for freedom (autonomy).
- Need to be valued (self-worth).

Since these needs are fragile, they require careful tending by all participants involved.

## **POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE FACE**

There are two face needs:

- Negative face (autonomy): the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction (freedom to action and freedom from self-imposition).
- Positive face (self-worth): the positive consistent self-image or 'personality'.

In general, people co-operate (and assume each other's cooperation) in maintaining face in interaction.

## **FACE THREATENING ACTS**

There are certain acts that threaten face:

- Threats to negative face (autonomy):
  - Orders, threats, warnings etc.
- Threats to positive face (self-worth):
  - Expressions of disapproval, criticism, ridicule, complaints, reprimands, accusations, insults etc.

## FEATURES OF INFORMAL LANGUAGE

### PHONOLOGY

METALANGUAGE	DEFINITION/EXAMPLE	ROLE OF THESE FEATURES IN AN INFORMAL TEXT
Elision	The omission of a phoneme in a speech. Words such as <i>handsome</i> and <i>mostly</i> are frequently pronounced with the omission of /d/ in <i>handsome</i> and /t/ in <i>mostly</i> . Elision is common in casual speech styles, particularly word boundaries. For example, <i>me and you</i> becomes [mi:ənju:] where the /æ/ has been reduced to /ə/, the unstressed vowel sound called <b>schwa</b> . The function words (pronouns, auxiliary verbs, prepositions, conjunctions and the determiners) are reduced and attach to the preceding word: <i>it's</i> , <i>don't</i> etc	In an informal context, sounds are dropped, added or reduced. When participants are chatting with someone they are familiar with and in a comfortable surrounding, they tend to be relaxed and do not worry about clarity, especially when there is closeness, solidarity and shared common knowledge between the speaker and their listener(s). This sort of economy of speech would not be possible in a more formal setting owing much to the need to be clear and comprehensible. Another factor is our familiarity with the vocabulary. This encourages us to take shortcuts thereby enabling us to speak really fast.
Assimilation	Assimilation describes the process in which two phonemes occurring together are influenced by each other, making the sounds more alike. This frequently occurs in running speech at word boundaries, where utterances are unplanned and exchanges tend to be fast. For example, <i>I can go</i> is said [aɪkænɡəʊ] instead of [aɪ kæn ɡəʊ]. Another example is something called <b>flap</b> where the word <i>latter</i> is pronounced as <i>ladder</i> – the /t/ sound becoming /d/, where the tongue actually is ‘flapping’ against the teeth ridge.	
Vowel Reduction	This involves the substitution of a weaker vowel, usually schwa, /ə/, but sometimes /ɪ/ or /ʊ/, for a stronger one. This frequently happens in connected speech where many monosyllabic words, such as <i>to</i> , <i>for</i> , <i>and</i> , are lightly stressed, with the consequence that their vowel segments are reduced to schwa. Vowel reduction similarly occurs in polysyllabic words in those syllables that are unstressed. In <i>occurred</i> for example, the initial syllable /ɒ/ is usually reduced to /ə/ in running speech.	
Addition of sounds	In connected speech, sounds are also sometimes added. For example, the word <i>film</i> being pronounced as <i>filum</i> . Sometimes the word <i>family</i> is pronounced as <i>fambly</i> . In another example, the word <i>idea</i> is sometimes pronounced as <i>idea(r)</i> .	

## MORPHOLOGY

METALANGUAGE	DEFINITION/EXAMPLE	WHAT ROLE DOES THIS FEATURE PLAY IN AN INFORMAL TEXT?
Diminutives	Diminutives or hypocoristics are shortened or modified forms of words like <i>ambo</i> for 'ambulance officer', <i>fierie</i> or <i>firie</i> for 'fire officer', <i>beaut</i> as a cover-all term of approval. Place names are also shortened, for example, <i>Brizzie</i> for 'Brisbane' or <i>Gabba</i> for the cricket ground of that name (Woolloongabba). Even hotel names are shortened, as in <i>The YJ</i> for 'The Young and Jackson's in Melbourne. Sportspersons are often honoured: <i>AB</i> for 'Alan Border', <i>Thorpedo</i> for 'Ian Thorpe'. Some words have multiple alternative hypocoristics, for example, 'afternoon' is represented by <i>arvie</i> , <i>arvo</i> , <i>sarvo</i> etc.	This tendency to shorten or modify words shows some deep-seated relevance for Australian speakers – solidarity and playfulness. It also reflects values such as informality, mateship, good humour, egalitarianism and anti-intellectualism that are present in Australian English.
Reduplication	A structural repetition within a word, <i>baba</i> , <i>dada</i> , <i>pell-mell</i> . Words such as <i>nice-shmice</i> , <i>mumbo-jumbo</i> , <i>hankey-pankey</i> , <i>hocus-pocus</i> , <i>school-shmool</i> etc that produce a rhyming pattern are also examples of reduplication.	This again shows the playfulness, a part of informal language use.

## LEXICOLOGY

METALANGUAGE	DEFINITION/EXAMPLE	WHAT ROLE DOES THIS FEATURE PLAY IN AN INFORMAL TEXT?
Ellipsis	Ellipsis refers to the omission of an element of language. As long as readers can easily recognise exactly what has been deleted, part of a sentence can be omitted to avoid repetition. For example, in response to a question one might ask <i>'How are you feeling?'</i> we can say <i>'Fine'</i> (without having to say <i>'I am feeling fine'</i> ).	This feature is used for the sake of economy and is a common feature in informal texts, especially in the spoken mode.
Shortening	Reduction of form (or shortening) is another feature of informal language. It is simply abbreviated versions of longer words. For example, <i>rents</i> for <i>parents</i> , <i>sec</i> for <i>second</i> , <i>bro</i> for <i>brother</i> etc.	Frequent everyday words are often clipped or cropped for speed and efficiency. Such reductions are tolerated in informal settings and not in formal contexts.
Slang	Slang is peculiar to a particular social group. It is an informal nonstandard vocabulary composed typically of coinages, arbitrarily changed words, and extravagant, forced or facetious figures of speech. Slang is language of highly colloquial and contemporary type. It often uses <i>metaphor</i> , and/or <i>ellipsis</i> and often manifests <i>word play</i> in which current language is employed in some special sense and denotation. Different cultures and social groups develop their own forms of slang.	It serves the dual function of solidarity and secrecy. It may be used in particular contexts to shock, upset or annoy.
Swearing	Swearing refers to strongly emotional use of taboo expressions in insults, epithets (or labels) and expletives. It appears regularly in the language of internet, creative writing, spontaneous public speech and private conversation.	Expletive function (letting off steam). Abuse and insult. Expression of social solidarity. Stylistic choice (the marking of attitude to what is said).

## SYNTAX/GRAMMATICAL

METALANGUAGE	CHARACTERISTIC FEATURE	NON-STANDARD USE (INFORMAL)	STANDARD USE (FORMAL)
Forming questions	Usually questions are formed by inverting the order of the subject and verb in a declarative sentence. For example: ' <i>It is raining</i> ' (declarative sentence) becomes ' <i>Is it raining?</i> '). Informal language is characterised by a lack of subject-verb inversion.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What <b>they are</b> talking about?</li> <li>2. When <b>you would</b> like to go?</li> <li>3. What <b>you</b> doing? (lacks auxiliary verb)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What <u>are</u> <b>they</b> talking about?</li> <li>2. When <u>would</u> <b>you</b> like to go?</li> <li>3. What <u>are</u> <b>you</b> doing?</li> </ol>
Use of pronoun	Subject pronoun is used when it is clear who the actor of the sentence is. For example, the first person singular pronoun ' <i>I</i> '. Object Pronoun is used when a pronoun replaces the noun that receives the action of the verb (object). For example, the first person singular pronoun ' <i>me</i> '. Possessive pronouns are used to show ownership. For example, the first person singular pronoun ' <i>my</i> '.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. My brother and <b>me</b> were late.</li> <li>2. That's where <b>me</b> heart beats from.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. My brother and <b>I</b> were late.</li> <li>2. That's where <b>my</b> heart beats from.</li> </ol>
Negation	Negation is marked by individual words, such as <i>not</i> , <i>no</i> , <i>never</i> or by affixes within a word, such as <i>-n't</i> , <i>un-</i> , <i>non-</i> . Multiple negatives are used in many varieties of English to create emphasis. The most common form is the double negative.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I haven't done <b>nothing</b>.</li> <li>2. You didn't bring <b>no</b> presents.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I haven't done <b>anything</b>.</li> <li>2. You didn't bring <b>any</b> presents.</li> </ol>
Use of comparatives and superlatives	Adjectives inflect for grade and there are plain, comparative (when comparing two things – they are formed by adding the suffix <i>-er</i> to the adjective or add <i>more</i> ) and superlatives (when comparing three or more things - they are formed by adding the suffix <i>-est</i> to the adjective or add <i>most</i> ). Double comparatives and superlatives are used to add emphasis.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. He is <b>more</b> smarter....</li> <li>2. His classes are much <b>more</b> easier to follow.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. He is smarter....</li> <li>2. His classes are <b>easier</b> to follow.</li> </ol>

METALANGUAGE	CHARACTERISTIC FEATURE	NON-STANDARD USE (INFORMAL)	STANDARD USE (FORMAL)
Question tags	Question tags are a common device used for seeking confirmation. It generally consists of just an auxiliary verb + personal pronoun subject and it is the reverse of that of the clause to which it is attached. However, invariant tags are used informal language.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. He can play golf, <b>or not?</b> (or) He can play golf, <b>yes or not?</b></li> <li>2. You didn't see him, <b>is it?</b></li> <li>3. He left, <b>isn't?</b></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. He can play golf, <b>can't he?</b></li> <li>2. You didn't see him, <b>did you?</b></li> <li>3. He left, <b>hasn't he?</b></li> </ol>