
‘The meaning of a word is its use in language.’ (Ludvig Wittgenstein)

How might this Philosophical Position help us to
Understand the Role of Register in the English Language?

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Register is a context-dependent form of language usage and has several roles in English, both functioning formally as a framework for a discourse, and, more widely, conveying a set of societally recognised connotations to the reader or listener to signify membership of a particular group sociolinguistically.¹ In the first case the use of a register appropriate to the form can serve to complement and accentuate the ideas expressed, in the second case the active choice of register can be used as an identifier for ideological or social purposes. The importance of context as a means of modulating and expanding the meaning of a word is the major way in which Wittgenstein's philosophical position helps us to understand the role of registers in English and the different roles register plays in *Paradise Lost*, *Pygmalion*, and *Midnight's Children* illustrate that the meaning of a word is dependent on the way it is used in the English language.

Inherent in Wittgenstein's position that 'the meaning of a word is its use in language' are two fundamental ideas about words. Firstly that, on the basic level, 'Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.'² Simply, a word is a signifier for either one or many signifieds, existing ideas or objects, and which signified the word refers to, *i.e.* its meaning, depends on the context of its use.³ However, this first idea is restrictive and a second, social way a word's meaning is determined by its use in language is more useful in understanding the role of register in English. The specific way a word is used in a specific context conveys a far greater amount of information than simply its dictionary definition, encompassing a host of associations and

¹ Peter Trudgill, 'Standard English: What it isn't', *Standard English: The Widening Debate*, ed. Tony Bex and Richard J. Watts (London: Routledge, 1999), p.122.

² Anat Biletzki and Anat Matar, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), last accessed 27/04/2016, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/wittgenstein/>.

³ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (McGraw-Hill Book Company: New York, 1915), pp.65-70.

cultural connotations to do with both the word's previous use and with the expectations imposed by the context in which it is used in that particular situation.⁴

The importance of context as a means of modulating the meaning of a word in this second idea shows the main way Wittgenstein's statement informs our understanding of some of the roles of register in the English language. Context here denotes both the social situation itself and the accompanying level of formality of that situation. Unlike a dialect, which tends to be geographically 'peculiar to a specific region',⁵ register is 'a variety or level of [language] usage [...] determined by social context and [...] used by a speaker or writer in particular circumstances'.⁶ The social aspects of register are obvious in this definition, and it is the way that the meaning of a word in language can 'vary according to the social role of the speaker' which is the root of the roles of register in English.⁷ The three salient contextual aspects which affect the choice of register, are *field*, 'the subject matter of the discourse', *tenor*, the role of the speaker (which also determines the level of formality), and *mode*, the 'medium of communication'.⁸ Commonly, the role of registers is to provide a means of communication which conforms to a set of expectations about the subject matter and its presentation, such as specific vocabulary and predictable mode. For example, in the register of a weather forecast, the word 'depression' is a specialised term meaning a weather system which brings rain, while in the medical register the word means a 'psychiatric disorder'⁹ characterised by misery and dejection, or, in an economic context, the 'lowering in

⁴ Linda Thomas, Shân Wareing, Ishtla Singh, Jean Stilwell Peccei, Joanna Thornborrow, and Jason Jones, *Language, Society and Power: An introduction, Second Edition* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.67-9.

⁵ "dialect, n." (OED Online: Oxford University Press, 2016), last accessed 27/04/2016, <http://www.oed.com/>.

⁶ "register, n.1." (OED Online: Oxford University Press, 2016), last accessed 27/04/2016, <http://www.oed.com/>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Language, Society and Power*, p219.

⁹ "depression, n." (OED Online: Oxford University Press, 2016), last accessed 27/04/2016, <http://www.oed.com/>.

quality, vigour, or amount' of trade.¹⁰ The role of register here is to help communicate the subject matter more clearly and precisely by providing a recognisable frame of reference for the particular range of vocabulary and phrases specific to the field.

So far this description of the role of register in English, while showing clearly how the meaning of a word varies with the context of its use in language, only goes as far as the first, basic idea mentioned in the introduction, that words are simply signifiers, potentially with several referents. However, when the register used conforms to the expectations imposed by the context and is appropriate to the subject matter, the register's role is to amplify and reinforce the meaning of the passage. This is particularly true of literature, especially poetry in which the form is such a key constituent in creating the overall effect. Milton's *Paradise Lost* aspires to the expression of 'Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme', surpassing all previous epics in the sublimity of its subject matter.¹¹ Milton chooses the mode of an appropriate register to match the grand nature of the field, an 'answerable style' of great formality and rhetorical eloquence even by the superlative standards of the epic genre, to convey his theodicy effectively and persuasively.¹² By using a detached narrative voice, which Martin Joos states as the primary 'defining feature of formal style',¹³ rhetorical devices such as anadiplosis — 'Be judged and die,/ And dying rise, and rising with Him raise/ His brethren,'¹⁴ —, Homeric genealogies, and extended similes derived from antiquity¹⁵ — 'Thick as leaves that strew the brooks/ In Vallombrosa, where th'

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (London: Arcturus, 2010), Book I, l.17.

¹² Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book IX, l.20.

¹³ Joos, *The Five Clocks* (New York: Harbinger, 1961), p.38.

¹⁴ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book III, ll.295-7.

¹⁵ In chapter 5 of *From Virgil to Milton* (p.240-1) Bowra traces the development of this image of souls as leaves from classical epic, through intermediary epics, all the way to *Paradise Lost*.

Etrurian shades/ High over arched embower;'¹⁶ — Milton chooses a register which 'of all grand styles [...] is the grandest'¹⁷ and which raises 'all topics [...] to the same sublime level'.¹⁸ As Creaser writes, *Paradise Lost* is 'the epic of free will and liberty of conscience, and Milton creates the profoundly apt medium for it'.¹⁹ In this case, where the choice of register is appropriate and complementary to the field, the role of register is thus, on an implicit, formal level, to lend authority to the subject matter of the work.

The use of register above maintains what Martin Joos calls 'literary good form',²⁰ which 'is whatever keeps the reader feeling at home'.²¹ The social nature of register, which this quotation from Joos hints at, is central to its role in English and is the second way in which Wittgenstein's statement helps us to understand that the wider associations, or, in a broader sense, meaning, of a word can associate an individual with a particular group. The OED entry for 'register' makes this social connection explicit with its examples elaborating on its basic definition; 'Interference may ... vary according to the social role of the speaker in any given case. This is what [is] called register';²² 'Varieties of English distinguished by use in relation to social context are called registers.';²³ 'Chaucer must therefore have used what was, for the London of his time, a more formal, possibly more archaic, register.'²⁴ This social aspect is the first reason that the choice of register can be exploited for social and ideological purposes. The second is that, by choosing to use a particular register, the

¹⁶ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book I, ll.302-4.

¹⁷ C. M. Bowra, *From Virgil to Milton* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1945), p.198.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ John Creaser, 'Verse and Rhyme', *Milton in Context*, ed. S. B. Dobranski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.111.

²⁰ Joos, *The Five Clocks*, p.67.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² "register, n.1.", OED Online, last accessed 30/04/2016.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

speaker actively signifies a particular kind of context. This is due not only to the fact that registers are usually used to communicate in a way which is appropriate to the context but also that speakers are not ‘sociolinguistic automata’ who blindly respond to, for example, the level of formality in their speech, but have an awareness of that level and change register to suit it.²⁵ Equally, from the choice of using a certain register in a certain context, passively, the listener is able to discern a range of information about the speaker’s social standing and opinion of the formality of the situation. Two examples serve to illustrate this point, in *Pygmalion*, the ability of a member of the lower classes, to quote Henry Higgins’s invective, a ‘squashed cabbage leaf [...] incarnate insult to the English language’,²⁶ to integrate with the aristocracy, and Salman Rushdie’s chutnification of language in *Midnight’s Children*.

Firstly then, in *Pygmalion* Shaw shows the ability of lower class Victorians to signify membership of the aristocracy through their use of an appropriately formal register of standard English. The Renaissance ‘notion of correct speech [...] as a criterion of good breeding’²⁷ became even more important in the Victorian period in denoting the aristocracy since ‘[the upper classes] are neither cleaner, richer, nor better educated than anyone else’.²⁸ Because ‘[geographically] Local variants become increasingly unlike one another as we descend the social scale’,²⁹ ‘[becoming] more alike as we ascend [the social scale]’,³⁰ speaking in a formal register of standard English allowed the speaker of a lower social

²⁵ H. Giles, ‘Accent Mobility: a model and some data’, *Anthropological Linguistics*, 01/02/1973, Vol.15(2), pp.87-105.

²⁶ George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion* (London: Penguin, 1916), Act I, p.18.

²⁷ David Crystal, *The Stories of English*, (London : Penguin, 2005), Chapter 10.

²⁸ Alan S. C. Ross, quoted by Nancy Mitford, ‘The English Aristocracy’, *Noblesse Oblige*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1956), p.42.

²⁹ A. Lloyd James, Introduction to *Broadcast English*, (London: Broadcasting House, 1935), p.10.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

standing to convey the impression (to those who did not know them) that they were from the same social set as members of the upper classes. This is due to the homogeneity of standard English across the country, which, usefully for the speaker, prevented suspicions that the speaker came from anywhere disreputable. In *Pygmalion*, George Bernard Shaw humorously dramatises this point. Eliza Doolittle, a flower-selling street urchin, is able to negotiate a tea party with the aristocratic Eynsford Hill family using only the most banal civilities, but couching them in an appropriately formal register: 'Colonel Pickering, is it not?'³¹ and 'So pleased to have met you. Goodbye.'³² She thus passively associates herself with her audience. Eventually Eliza speaks English so well that she deceives everyone at a debutante's ball into thinking she is a princess, including the interpreter Nepommuck who denounces her for speaking English 'too perfectly'.³³ She is even told that she speaks 'exactly like Queen Victoria'.³⁴ Admittedly, Shaw also ironically undercuts this argument at the tea party by showing that Eliza herself has no understanding of the social implications of the register she speaks. She quickly slips back into the bathetically informal register of a Covent Garden flower-girl 'Walk! Not bloody likely!'³⁵ This demotic language, mixed with formal elements of diction and still in her perfectly modulated aristocratic accent, 'it's my belief they done the old woman in', combines both to shock and baffle Mrs Eynsford Hill. However, in spite of this, *Pygmalion* is a dramatisation of register's 'sociolinguistic function of symbolising a speaker or writer's membership of a particular group'.³⁶

³¹ Shaw, *Pygmalion*, p.59.

³² Shaw, *Pygmalion*, p.61.

³³ Shaw, *Pygmalion*, p.71.

³⁴ Shaw, *Pygmalion*, p.72.

³⁵ Shaw, *Pygmalion*, p.62.

³⁶ Trudgill, 'Standard English: What it isn't', *Standard English*, p.122.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* also actively makes use of the role of register, this time with ideological intent. In this case register has two roles. Firstly it works as a formal framework for the narrative and, secondly, it wrests control of the discourse and so subverts colonial power at a basic linguistic level. Rushdie extends the role of register by using a uniquely Indian version of English which seeks 'to break up the language and put it back together a different way',³⁷ to 'play with [language's] structures, in order to deconstruct it'.³⁸ He employs exotic Urdu or Indian words such as 'ekdum' (at once), 'baba' (grandfather), 'badmaas' (ruffian), and 'gulmohar and bougainvillaea, the livid green of the Mahalaxmi Temple "tank"'³⁹ as well as unusual punctuation 'wallowing in the sounds of hot-channa-hot hawkers, the throng of camels bicycles and people people people',⁴⁰ to give an 'oriental flavour' to the language.⁴¹ In other parts of the novel he also uses playful combinations and euphemisms like 'nearlynine'⁴² and 'your other pencil' which would jar in the context of a conventional Colonial text.⁴³

Rushdie, while employing some of the conventions of standard English such as spelling, uses a register appropriate to the Indian geographical and social context of the field, but which is simultaneously juxtaposed with the register used by previous writers such as T. E. Lawrence in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Firstly then, this choice of Rushdie's to use an informal narrative register has the same function as the formal register in *Paradise*

³⁷ Jean-Pierre Durix, 'Salman Rushdie.', *Conversations with Salman Rushdie*, ed. Michael R. Reder. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000).

³⁸ Rob Burton, *Artists of the Floating World: Contemporary Writers between Cultures* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2007), p.104.

³⁹ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Vintage, 2008), p.411-12.

⁴⁰ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p.411-12.

⁴¹ O. P. Dwivedi, 'Linguistic Experiments in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*', *Transnational Literature Vol. 1, No. 1*, November 2008, last accessed 04/05/2016,

<http://dspace.flinders.edu.au/xmlui/bitstream/handle/2328/3244/Dwivedi.pdf?sequence=1>, p.1.

⁴² Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p.332.

⁴³ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p.455.

Lost in that, being appropriate to the field, ‘it serves to make [the reader] an insider simply by treating him as an insider’.⁴⁴ The informal register linguistically and formally asserts the novel’s value as a historiographic metafiction, making Saleem’s recollections both plausible and vivid while simultaneously drawing attention to their artifice. Secondly, the informality and distinctly Indian nature of the register identifies the reader with the same group as Saleem, creates a sense of cultural relativity, and so implicitly persuades the reader of the deficiencies of the colonial metanarrative.⁴⁵ Rushdie is not using a register inappropriate to the context, but is rather choosing a register in order to change the perspective on the context from an European to an Indian one. For example he said he ‘had to punctuate [the novel] in a very peculiar way, to destroy the natural rhythms of the English language...That sort of thing just seemed to help to dislocate the English and let others into it.’⁴⁶ By appropriating the dominant discourse through, among other features, register, Rushdie makes the reader aware that the eurocentric, colonial metanarrative is not the only one. By using the ideological role of register he is able ‘to subvert a language associated with colonial powers’⁴⁷ and, in Rushdie’s words, to ‘write back’ against the Empire.⁴⁸

To conclude, Wittgenstein’s statement that ‘The meaning of a word is its use in language’ primarily helps us to understand the importance of context in modulating the meaning of a word, and that, because the use of a register is by definition context dependent, registers are of considerable importance as signifiers in social situations. This

⁴⁴ Joos, *The Five Clocks*, p.23.

⁴⁵ Although, characteristically for a postmodern author, in *Midnight’s Children* Rushdie often ironically questions the validity of Saleem’s narrative itself, a point he makes even more explicitly in *Shame*: ‘The country in this story is not Pakistan, or not quite. There are two countries, real and fictional, occupying the same space, or almost the same space.’: Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (London: Cape, 1983), p.23.

⁴⁶ Durix, *Conversations with Salman Rushdie*.

⁴⁷ Dwivedi, ‘Linguistic Experiments’, p.1.

⁴⁸ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands : Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Vintage Books, 2010), Contents.

understanding thus illuminates two of the roles of register in the English language. A register appropriate to the context can, on a formal level, support the field of a spoken or written text. Secondly, used in an unusual context so that its inherent associations, such as affluence with a register using a particularly formal 'range of vocabulary, pronunciation, [and] syntax', register can have the role of refiguring the context and so taking control of the discourse.⁴⁹ This second role of register shows how the meaning of a word can be manipulated, in this case with social intent, so that the meaning of words vary with their use in language.

⁴⁹ "register, n.1." (OED Online: Oxford University Press, 2016), last accessed 27/04/2016.

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