11 Register and politeness

Summary   11.1 Register. – 11.2 Politeness.

The term *register* refers to the relationship between the form of a language and the context in which the language is used. It also relates to some kinds of linguistic variation that are triggered by specific communicative situations. Indeed, every speaker tends to adapt his/her language to the context and to the specific features of certain communicative situations.

Generally, registers are considered from three different perspectives: the tenor, the mode and the field involved in the communication. As for the tenor, it refers to the communicative interactions set among the participants, with a special attention on the role the participants play within the communicative exchange and to the social relations which hold among them. The mode relates to the channel, that consists of all the types of communicative means which can be used (such as the spoken, sign, or written channel), the linguistic code in use (Italian, English, LIS), the level of preparation of the discourse (spontaneous or previously planned), and the genre and the style of the communicative interactions, for example narrative, didactic, informative, or persuasive. Finally, the field concerns the whole communicative event, in his general features relating to the topics of the communications or to the matter.

Politeness is the way in which people try to show their awareness in protecting the public self-imagine of the other people they are communicating with. It consists of a range of social skills which facilitate the self-perception of the participants among the different social interactions. It is also related to the concept of face, namely to the concept of public self-imagine that everyone would like to protect across the communicative exchange with other people.

11.1 Register

Sign languages are languages which present a smaller spectrum of registers in comparison to spoken languages. This is primary due to the lack of a written form, which typically triggers standardisation processes. Indeed, sign languages still display a high level of heterogeneity and linguistic variation.

However, different communicative situations may trigger in signers a certain amount of linguistic variation within the discourse event. Such variation is detected at multiple levels of sign languages, i.e. at the phonological, lexical, morphological, and syntactical level.

At the phonological level, variation may concern the difference in the use of the signing space, the duration of signs, and the frequency of phonological assimilation. From the lexical and morphological perspective, modifications involve the amount of iconicity and the non-manual marking used within the conversation. Syntactically, specific contexts may affect the amount of topicalisation and the different use of classifiers and discourse particles.

Linguistic variation in LIS can be clearly observed when comparing formal and informal contexts. An example of formal discourse is one produced by a signer giving a talk in front of a large audience at an important meeting. On the other hand, an example of informal discourse is a conversation between friends at a coffee house. These two types of contexts are likely to differ with respect to several aspects.

Prosodically, formal environments usually trigger a reduction of the signing space, and the absence of emphasis or prominence in the use of non-manual markers, especially in the use of facial expressions. Conversely, in an informal context, signs tend to be realised in a larger signing space. This difference in movement amplitude can be observed in the screenshots below, showing the realisation of the sign COME_BACK in a formal (a) and informal (b) setting.

a. COME_BACK (formal)

b. COME_BACK (formal)

This verb is produced with a different amplitude in the two contexts: in (a) the use of the signing space is visibly smaller than in (b).

Another difference that can be observed is the use of non-manuals. In formal signing, the torso is mostly straight and moves little, while in informal signing the body posture is more dynamic. Also, in informal discourse facial expressions tend to be more emphasised, similarly to what happen in spoken languages with intonation contours.

Lexically, formal discourse may include less frequent signs and technical terminology. For example, signers may produce specialised terms. In the example below, the technical term RESEARCH^WRITTEN_TEXT is produced accompanied by the mouthing of the equivalent Italian word ('perizia').

<div align="center">

_____'perizia'

IX$_1$ TASK FOCUS RESEARCH^WRITTEN_TEXT

'My task is to focus on the (judicial) examination.'

</div>

To convey specific Italian terms or acronyms, fingerspelling is typically used.

IX$_1$ WORK WHERE UNIVERSITY CA_FOSCARI INSIDE. IX$_1$ ROLE WHICH C-E-L MEANING   COLLABORATE EXPERT LINGUISTICS

'I work at Ca' Foscari university. I am a CEL, namely a Language Collaborator and Expert.'

By contrast, daily and more common signs are used in informal discourse. For example, in such context, signs like FUSSY (a) and BETTER_AVOID (b) may be used.
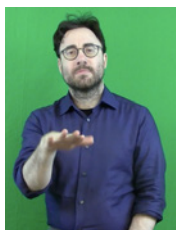
a. PE IX(unspread 5)$_3$ FUSSY++ PALM_UP
'She is so fussy.'

b. IX$_1$ SIGN $_3$LOOK_AT$_1$ BETTER_AVOID
'I'd better avoid signing if s/he is looking at me.'

At the beginning of informal exchanges, signers frequently attract the addressee's attention by waving the hand(s).

Figure 1 Attention-getter signal

From a morphological perspective, formal discourse is characterised by a lower degree of iconicity and less marked non-manuals, while in informal discourse iconicity is more extensively used and non-manual strategies are frequently involved in morphological processes.

Syntactically, it is possible to notice the accuracy in organising the information. The sentences are clearly structured, using a major amount of linguistic connective items, such as the signs REASON, THEN, or CONSEQUENCE. Repetition is preferred, avoiding a large amount of inference or ellipsis in the discourse, in order to convey the message unambiguously. As shown above in the sequence of signs IX$_1$ WORK WHERE UNIVERSITY CA_FOSCARI INSIDE, formal discourse frequently involved question-answer pairs. On the contrary, in informal discourse it is possible to observe a larger use of role shift, which allows the signer to take the perspective of a salient referent. Topicalisation and syntactic emphatic strategies, such as focus, are also more common in informal situations.

Another type of register, generally developed by a sub-group of people who want to increase their identity and cohesion, is slang. Young people are very likely to develop their own slang in order to: i) reinforce the sense of belonging to their group or ii) create an alternative communicative system which makes their conversation se-

cret and unintelligible to the comprehension of adults. The main productive topics in terms used by Italian young people's slang revolve around school, music, sexual sphere, drugs, politics, sport, appreciations or insults and peer group phenomena. Similarly, in LIS, these fields are particularly full of slang words created through specific linguistic processes, as for example: metaphors, metonymies, synecdoches, neologisms, play on sign modification, hyperboles, iconicity or specific uses of classifiers.

An example of a slang sign based on metaphors is the sign SALAD, displayed in the example below, which refers to the marijuana. The comparison is based on the fact that both of them are green and look like grass.

SALAD
'Marijuana' (based on Fedeli 2015, 86)

Another type of linguistic strategy used for creating slang is based on metonymic processes, namely on that mechanism which replaces a name of the referred entity with the name of something else that is closely bound to it. For example, indicating the cause in place of the effect, or the container in place of the content. In LIS, an example of this type of metonymy-based sign is TEMPERATURE which refers to the sexual excitement condition and may be explained as the result of the body response when someone is in this particular state. The sign for TEMPERATURE is shown below.

TEMPERATURE
'Sexual excitement' (based on Fedeli 2015, 92)

Another type, among others, of linguistic tool involved in the generation of new slang signs is the hyperbole. It is generally used with the intention of exaggerating or emphasizing a concept. A slang sign which uses this strategy is ESSAY. It is signed by young signers as a critique when someone is talking too much. The sign is provided below.

ESSAY
'Long-windedness' (based on Fedeli 2015, 94)

Other strategies may be the completely new creation of a sign, therefore a neologism, or the modification of an existing sign in order to create a humoristic effect or to mask some secret meaning. An example of neologism is the sign NOT_REALISE below, which aims at insulting people considered clumsy. It is signed with particular non-manual components: body leaning forward, semi-closed eyes and protruding tongue.

NOT_REALISE

'(To) not realise/notice something' (based on Fedeli 2015, 97)

An example of a modified sign is HUMBLE. The citation form is realised with a backward movement, as shown below.

HUMBLE

In the slang used by young signers, this sign can be slightly modified to convey the signer's disagreement about the assumed humble attitude of a person. Specifically, the modified version of the sign is realised with a forward movement.

HUMBLE[forward]
'Not humble' (based on Fedeli 2015, 101-102)

Also, classifiers may be used in order to generate new slangs. The example below displays a classifier indicating the legs of a woman to convey the meaning 'sex'.

CL(curved open G): 'spread_legs'
'Sex' (based on Fedeli 2015, 104)

11.2 Politeness

The concept of politeness and impoliteness changes cross-culturally and differs from language to language and from country to country. Interestingly, LIS makes a different use of para-linguistic strategies, as for example the personal and body contact with respect to spoken Italian. Indeed, due to the visual-gestural channel, in LIS the proxemics is reduced for linguistic and functional reasons. Proxemics refers to those implicit rules in a communicative exchange that establish the physical distance to be kept among participants in order not to be impolite. The physical contact is part of this proxemics sphere and the parameters in which it is allowed in a communication may change geographically and culturally. In spoken Italian, the vocal-auditory channel contributes in creating a barrier between interlocutors, and restricts the use of physical contact to more confident relationships, for example in a familiar environment or with friends. Physical contact in spoken formal conversations would be considered as rude or inappropriate. By contrast, in LIS, having a manual or physical contact during the signed conversation is not considered rude or impolite, but functional to some linguistic needs. For exam-

ple, in a group conversation, if a signer needs to focus the attention of a certain participant who gives the shoulders to him, it is completely acceptable to call him by touching his/her shoulder.

However, depending on the use of the body, it is also possible to act impolitely, for example, to turn one's back in front of someone who is signing is considered a clear signal of communicative disregard.

In situations where the communicative exchange starts to become tense, in order to mitigate an unpolite behaviour, some signs may be used by the participants at the conversation who want to keep a peaceful atmosphere, as for example the sign HOLD_ON (a) or QUIET (b).

a. HOLD_ON
'Wait a moment'

b. QUIET
'Be quiet'

Some linguistic strategies referring to polite manners may also be conveyed through the use of non-manual markers, which may correspond to specific vocal uses and intonations in spoken languages. LIS disposes of a particular protrusion of the lips in order to emphasize a major politeness in the request, as displayed in the example below.

$$\overline{\hspace{2.5cm}\text{y/n}\hspace{1cm}}$$
$\text{IX}_1 \ _1\text{ASK}_2 \ \text{CAN IX}_1$
'May I ask a question?'

A similar use is also shown in the example below.

$$\overline{\hspace{2.5cm}\text{y/n}\hspace{0.5cm}}$$
$\text{IX}_1 \ \text{INTERVENE CAN IX}_1$
'May I interject?'

Information on Data and Consultants

The descriptions in these sections are based on the references below and on acceptability judgments. For information on data and consultants see the references. The video clips and images exemplifying the linguistic data have been produced by a LIS native signer coming from the northern part of Italy and involved in the SIGN-HUB Project. Data have been collected by the author.

Authorship Information

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