

## Meaning expressions of some English registers

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### Introduction

Registers have enjoyed great scholarly attention from almost all aspects of language studies. These include linguistics, stylistics (Crystal and Davy 1969, Halliday and Hassan (1991), Gregory and Carrol (1978), Osisanwo (1997), etc); applied linguistics (Folarion (1979), Osisanya (1979), etc); sociolinguistics

(Stockwell (2002), Halliday (1978) etc), discourse analysis (Ghadessy (1988), Mathiessen (1993), Eggins and Martins (1997), etc) and pragmatics (Adegbite 1991, Odebunmi 2003, etc). Generally, these studies have applied the Hallidayian field, mode and tenor, in exact or expanded, sometimes operationalized, form to written and oral texts along the direction of their different foci. The present study varies a little from the existing studies in its adaptation of the features of register samples of different English discourse texts to delineate the term register along the line of its semantic manifestation.

The present study, therefore, examines the bounds of the English register i.e it explores the extent to which the term 'register' can be pursued. In other words, it considers the features that can be applied on a discourse piece to delineate the English register, exemplifying with oral and written texts.

### Definition and Scope of Register

Register is a broad concept that covers all forms and kinds of communication in terms of the linguistic forms used, the activities performed, the participants and their roles in the communication, the medium of communication, and the interconnectivity between one linguistic form and another. The term 'register' took a root from Wegener's (1885:252) bid to analyze language along "field of content distinguished by general subject matter, participants' interest, etc'. This view, merging with Malinowski (1923 [also 1953]) and Firth (1937), culminates in a clean conception of the context of situation, itself the spring board for recent scholarly interest and excursions in register. Gregory (1967) identifies dialectal variety and diatypic varieties as two main categories of language variety differentiation. Diatype, also called register, is described by Gregory (ibid: 177) as "the linguistic reflection of recurrent characteristics of user's use of language in situation." Three diatypic manifestations, which shall be discussed later in this chapter, have been identified. They are 'field of discourse', 'mode of discourse' and 'tenor of discourse' (Gregory (ibid); Halliday (1978)).

Definitions of register in the literature have tilted towards determining meaning by exploring situational usage, which employs features of language such as lexico-grammar and phonology (cf Halliday and Hassan 1991, Martin 1997, Oluruntoba-Oju, 1999, etc). Martin (1997: 234) is thus right to define register as "a theoretical explanation of the commonsense observation that we use language differently in different situations". Stockwell (2002) also correctly opines that register has social motivation, and that participants in a discourse negotiate socially to be able to use language appropriately. In his words, "the context of use is the crucial determinant in identifying register. In this way, slight differences in linguistic style can be ascribed to close differences in social function" (ibid:7).

There are two perspectives on register usage, viz narrow and broad. The narrow perspective equals register with jargon, such that the terms available for describing particular fields of specialization form the register of such fields. Thus, "thermodynamics" (physics) and "injection" (medicine) are told from each other because they point to different specializations. The broad perspective, on the other hand,

sees register as “a sort of social genre of linguistic usage” (Stockwell 2002:7). Register here is sometimes described as a sociolect; for example, the language of a newspaper article. Another is the language of academic prose.

## Theoretical Base

Locating register in a semiotic space, Matthiessen (1993) notes that the overall organization of language in context is shown in registers. According to him, “the language in context complex is organized globally along the dimensions of stratification, meta functional diversification, and potentiality” (ibid: 225). This organization produces the following set of stratal sub-systems: context, semantics, lexico-grammar and phonology/graphology. Each sub-system shows “the same basic dimensions of organization: axis, delicacy and rank” (ibid). Matthiessen calls this organization “fractal”. This is because it constitutes the basic principle of intra-stratal organization that is manifested in different stratal environments” (ibid). Stratification draws from the fact that language in context is interpreted as a system of subsystems ordered in symbolic abstraction” (ibid: 226). It is considered in respect of context and language. Its context arm involves both the context of situation and context of culture. Matthiessen (ibid) submits that the context of situation is “the place where a register’s contextual significance is stated in terms of field, tenor and mode values; and ... it has been further stratified to include genre as one plane”. The language aspect has three parts: semantics, lexico-grammar and phonology/graphology. “Functional diversification” rides on the principle that the context of situation and the content strata, i.e. semantics and lexico-grammar, are functionally diversified. “Potentiality” brings temporality into the concepts to provide “a semiotic space-time (ibid:229). Finally, apart from the global dimensions of stratification, functional diversification and potentiality, there are also fractal dimensions, as said earlier. These dimensions are axis, delicacy and rank.

There is the need to expatiate on the context of situation segment of register. This is necessary because of our aim, in this paper, to view register as primarily and ultimately a concept of meaning, exploiting the subject matter (field) the relationships between participants (tenor) and the medium of communication (mode). Our view is, to the extent of utilizing the concept of situation tools, related to Halliday (1978) Folarin (1979), Halliday and Hassan (1991), Osisanwo (1997); but it differs in its emphasis on meaning, as against their own emphases on pedagogy, style and discourse.

Halliday (1978) deals extensively with the three dimensions of register. Field, according to him, refers to the “on-going activity and the particular purpose that the use of language is serving within the context of that activity” (Halliday 1978:62). In other words, utterances or words employed reveal the kind of activity that is going on. The following expression, for example, has as its field the activity of clay moulding: “clay is flattened and placed on top and a heap of sand on a bench”. The lexis or vocabulary has a good deal of influence on the field. This goes a long way in marking the difference between technical and non-technical fields. Eggins (1994:74) highlights the differences between technical language and everyday language. According to him, technical language employs everyday terms, full names, standard syntax and identifying processes. It is reasonable to agree with Montgomery (1992:104) that “a high proportion of vocabulary items are potentially capable of registering many diverse types of field”. In other words, certain words or utterances are found to describe more than one activity. Examples of these words are (a) conductor (b) period (c) reflection (d) syndrome, etc. which reflect in respective order physics/transportation (a), physics/chemistry/mathematics/astronomy/medicine(b), physics/social life(c) and medicine/socio-emotional aspect of life(d).

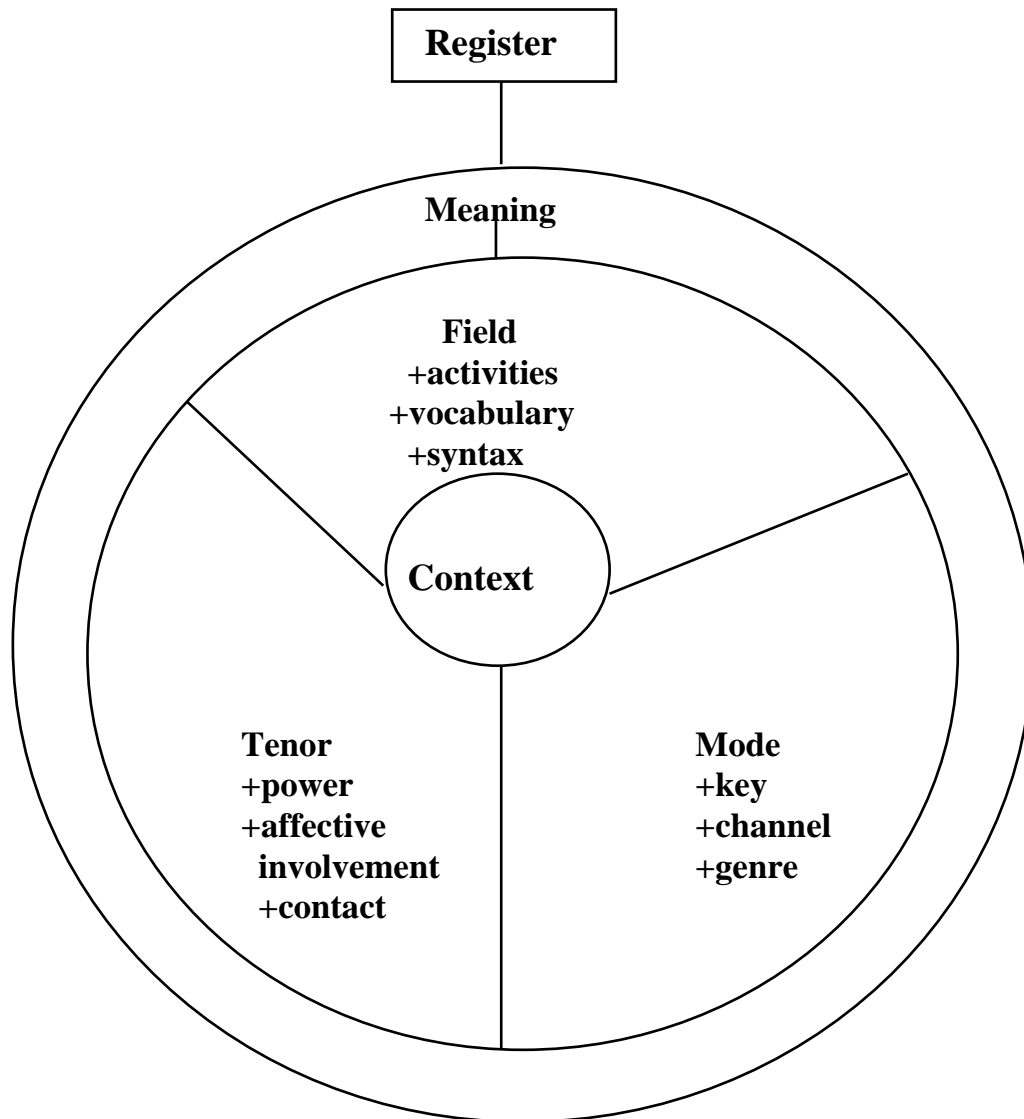
Halliday (1978) sees mode as covering Hyme’s channel, key and genre i.e. the message being passed across by H may be through speech, writing, signing, smoke signal, etc (channel); the evaluation of message i.e. whether the message is good or bad, sorry or impressive (key); the message form intended may be a fairy-tale, sermon, etc (genre). Eggins (1994:52) considers mode as “the role language is playing in the interaction”. This already has illustration in Halliday’s conception above. Martin (1984) recommends that mode should be considered in terms of two concurrent continuum which go in the way of language and situation distance, i.e. spatial/interpersonal distance and experiential distance. In the words of Eggins (1994:53), the spatial/interpersonal distance “ranges situations according to the possibilities of immediate feedback between the interactants”. The relative distance of the feedback is illustrated in casual conversation, telephone, e-mail, fax, radio and novel; the experiential distance, on the other hand, “ranges situations according to the distance between language and the social process occurring” This is exemplified by situations such as playing a game, running commen-

tary, recounting experience and constructing experience (cf Martin 1984). Mode delves into the issues of spoken and written media of communication. In this regard, it should be noted that the spoken language situation is interactive, face-to-face, language as action, spontaneous and casual, but the written language does not exhibit these features (Eggins 1994:55).

“Tenor refers to the interrelations among participants in terms of status and role relationships” (Halliday 1978:62). It can be considered along the line of the three continuum of power, affective involvement and contact (Poyton 1985). Power concerns “whether the roles we are playing are those in which we are of equal or unequal power”, contact deals with “whether the roles we are playing are those that bring us into frequent or infrequent contact”, and affective involvement concentrates on “whether the roles we are playing are those in which the affective involvement between us is high or low” i.e. the extent to which “we are emotionally involved or committed in a situation” (Eggins 1994: 64). It is important to note that the relationships between participants can be formal or informal. In an informal situation, for example, power is equal, contact is frequent and affective involvement is high; while in a formal situation, there is “unequal hierarchic power, infrequent, or on-off, contact and low affective involvement” (Eggins 1994:65). It, therefore, follows that informal language is characterized by attitudinal lexis, colloquial lexis, abbreviated forms, slang, swearing, interruptions, first name/nickname/diminutive typical mood choices, modalization to express probability and modalization to express opinion; while formal language is characterized by neutral lexis, formal lexis, full forms (of words), lack of slang, politeness phenomena, careful turn-taking, titles/no names, incongruent mood choices, modalization to express deference and modalization to express suggestion (Eggins 1994:67). The relationships among interactants may call for more specificity or require descriptions other than the broad formal or informal style. For example, between these relationships may be located styles such as frozen, semi-formal, consultative, etc. Sometimes however, overlaps occur where formal language is used in an informal situation and vice-versa.

## Methodology

Three different extracts have been isolated for the present study from (i) literature (ii) technical instruction (iii) hospital interactions. The extract from literature is from Achebe’s *Arrow of God*. This represents literary / written texts. The text for technical instruction is from a user’s manual for a type of video player. This represents both the written and scientific/instructional texts. The last extract drawn from a doctor-patient interaction represents the oral / conversational genre. The essence of these selections is to be able to generalize on the scope of registers from a variety of texts, examined against appropriate features of register. Each of the extracts shall be studied, using the analytical framework presented below:



**Figure 1: A Model of Register Analysis of Texts.**

The model demonstrates that register is primarily a semantic concept (cf Matthiessen 1993). Meaning which is central to register is achieved through the three dimensions of field, tenor and mode, which are in turn ineffective unless considered in relation to context. In the section below, we shall attempt a registerial analysis of the texts sampled for this study.

### **Register Analysis of Selected Texts**

#### **Text 1**

The place where the Christians built their place of worship was not far from Ezeulu's compound. As he sat in his *Obi* thinking of the Festival of the Pumpkin Leaves, he heard the bell: GOME, GOME, GOME, GOME. His mind turned from the festival to the new religion. He was not sure what to make of it. At first he had thought that since the white man had come with great power and conquest it was necessary that some people should learn the ways of the deity. That was why he had agreed to send his son, Oduche, to learn the new ritual. He also wanted to learn the whiten man's wisdom, for Ezeulu

knew from what he saw of Wintabota and the stories he heard about this people that the white man was very wise. But now Ezeulu was becoming afraid that the new religion was like a leper. Allow him a handshake and he wants to embrace. Ezeulu had already spoken strongly to his son who was becoming more strange every day. Perhaps the time had come to bring him out again. But what would happen if, as many oracles prophesied, the white man had come to take over and rule? In such a case it would be wise to have a man of your family in his band. As he thought about these things Oduche came out from the inner compound wearing a white singlet and a towel which they had given him in the school. Nwafo came out with him, admiring his singlet. Oduche saluted his father and set out for the mission because it was Sunday morning. The bell continued ringing in its sad monotone. (Excerpted from *Arrow of God*, P.42)

At the level of field, Text 1 portrays events in a literary world. This is demonstrated by characters and activities. Ezeulu ruminates over the new religion, Christianity, and tries to justify the participation of his son Oduche in the practice of the religion. This subject matter is presented through vocabulary and syntactic choices. The lexical choices of the author are reflected in (i) lexical occurrences and lexical collocation. First, showing lexical occurrences, the text is marked by borrowing. One major example is *Obji*, an Igbo word for 'compound'. By this choice, Achebe leads the reader into the Igbo architectural tradition and one of the place settings of the text. Figurative usage also abounds in the text. There is the use of onomatopoeia in "He heard the bell: GOME, GOME, GOME, GOME." The onomatopoeia gives the text its auditory effect. It brings off meaning by (i) echoing the actual sound of a typical Igbo bell (ii) expressing part of the activities marking the Festival of the Pumpkin Leaves. The expression, "The new religion was like a leper" is a simile. Also, personification is shown in "... was like a leper. Allow him a handshake and he wants to embrace". The meaning provided by the simile, whose imagery extends to the personification that follows, speaks of Christianity as an extreme religion that often skips the socio-cultural frontiers allowed it by its host. Second, the pattern of lexical collocation exhibited in the text is the free/loose type. Examples are: ...built... Place of worship, heard the bell, great power and conquest, learn the way, etc. Each of these, which can be replaced by other selections, describes events and impressions in the text. The place of worship built, for example, is the church; the way learnt or being learnt is the practice of Christianity, etc.

The syntactic preferences opted for by the author manifest in sentence types, mood and voice. The text is dominated by major sentences which in turn are dominated by complex sentences. These have the effect of revealing the complexity of the situation Ezeulu is going through, and providing accurate information regarding events, reasons, time, purposes, etc which the reader needs to understand the text. An example is presented below:

At first, he had thought that since the white man had come with great power and conquest it was necessary that some people should learn the ways of the deity. That was why he had agreed to send his son Oduche, to learn the new ritual.

The two sentences here are complex ones. The first thematises an adverbial phrase "At first", showing the process of Ezeulu's decision. The reason for the decision is supplied in the adverbial clause "since the white man ... conquest." In the second sentence, the reason and justification for his sending Oduche to the Christian community, which logically and ideationally coheres with the last clause of the preceding sentence is thematized. Also, the text is dominated by indicative mood, i.e. declaratives, in this instance. This supports the narrative nature of the text, and allows it to be followed easily. The text is dominated by active voice, showing that the author is interested in the participants and their actions.

At the level of tenor, Text 1 reveals a writer/reader relationship. The writer reports the imaginary events to the reader who imbibes the information without necessarily having to see him. Power is equal as the writer relates his experience with a reader who he wants to share the experience with him and form some impressions. Affective involvement is great. The writer has a sentiment that he wants to sell to the reader. This he does through his lexical and syntactic selections laden with it. For instance, the author is interested in making the reader consider Ezeulu's game in the text and form his opinion. Contact between the writer and reader is infrequent as literary texts, except when studied for examination purposes, are read for recreation, and such readings are selectively done.

At the level of mode, the text is a written type. It is therefore characterized by experiential distance, as the feedback is long term. The author may not know what the reader feels about his idea and the ideology/sentiment he had peddled. The channel, i.e. the written medium, is marked by lack of abbreviations, colloquialisms and slang, showing the semi-formal relationship between the writer and the reader. The channel is further characterized by major sentences. The key unveils the fact that the mode and strategies employed are good ones to get the writer's view and experience across to the

reader. The genre is a story telling/narrative one. This is demonstrated both by the tenses (past) used and the reportorial style adopted.

### **Text 2**

- Before operating the player, check that the operating voltage of the player is identical with your local power supply. The operating voltage is indicated on the nameplate at the rear of the player.
- The player is not disconnected from the AC power source (mains) as long as it is connected to the wall outlet, even if the player itself has been turned off.
- If you are not going to use the player for a long time, be sure to disconnect the player from the wall outlet. To disconnect the AC power cord (mains lead), grasp the plug itself; never pull the cord.
- Should the AC power cord (mains lead) need to be changed, have it done at a qualified service shop only.

(Super master Operating Instructions, p.4)

The field of discourse of Text 2 is a set of technical instructions given to a buyer/user of a CD player to operate the set. Three types of lexical occurrences are noticed: (i) jargon, e.g. voltage, disconnect, etc (ii) plain words, e.g., player, power, (ii) acronym, e.g. AC. The jargonic selections typify the specific field-base, i.e. electricity, by which the set operates; so also do the plain words and acronym. "Voltage" describes the amount of electricity required by the user to operate the set; "player" identifies the set itself; "power", "supply" and "AC" trace the source of operation of the player. Both the fixed and free types of lexical collocation are observed in the text. Examples of the fixed type are: operating the player, the operating voltage, AC power cord, etc. Some examples of the free type include: grasp the plug, never pull the cord and rears of the player. It is difficult to replace the fixed collocation without tinkering the specificity of the instructions being given. These choices serve the purpose of removing ambiguity and confusion on the part of the user and allowing the expressions to take on universal complexions. Hence, you "operate the player", not only "play". This example, for instance, covers all the activities done on and with the player. The free collocation, which can be replaced by other lexical options, give room for creativity and leave the user with some freedom of action. For example, "grasp the plug," points to only one of the many ways the user may decide to hold the plug, albeit with a caution supplied by "never pull the cord".

The syntax of Text 2, like that of Text 1 reveals major sentences which are dominated by complex sentences; mood, which is dominated by indicatives; and voice, which is dominated by the passive voice. The complex sentences, which are mainly noun clauses and adverbial clauses, provide information about actions, time, locations and conditions, all of which are indispensable in operating the player. An example is presented below:

The player is not disconnected from the AC power source (mains) as long as it is connected to the wall outlet, even if the player itself has been turned off.

This part of Text 2 informs about what not to do with the player ("...is not disconnected ..."); when not to do such ("as long as it is connected..."); and the condition associated with it ("even if the player..."). The type of indicative mood dominant is imperatives. This, of course, agrees with the genre, i.e. technical instruction, being dealt with. The dominant passive voice has the value to give the user information about the processes, actions and objects involved. The recipient of the information is however largely assumed and therefore ellipted as the imperatives show, except in a few instances where the recipient is represented by the second person pronoun "you", typical of imperatives.

At the level of tenor, Text 2 shows a manufacturer/user relationship. Power here is unequal as the instructor directs the instructed on what he is ignorant of. Given this seeming transactional, formal relationship, affective involvement is low. No sentiment is sold. No intimacy is involved as the focus of the communication is the instruction and compliance with the instruction. Unlike in Text 1, contact in Text 2 is fairly frequent as the user may need to be in touch with the instructions for as long as he/she is yet to fully master them or he/she needs clarifications or specific guides.

At the level of mode, the text is characterized by experiential distance, as in Text 1. The channel is the written medium. This is marked by (a) technical abbreviation(s) and major sentences. The formality of the text is shown by the absence of colloquialisms and slang. The key is good as it accurately repre-

sents the medium through which technical instructions can be conveyed. The genre, of course, is technical instruction; hence, imperatives are preponderant.

### Text 3

**Background:** Patient X entered the office of Doctor Y supported. She appeared gaunt and wasted.

She gave history [sic] of prolonged diarrhoea, cough and weight loss of onset of about 3 months.

Doctor Y: Hello madam, how is your health?

Patient X: Doctor I am not well at all. I have been sick for more than 3 months but the problem is that I have been losing weight and I'm having persistent diarrhoea. I have taken flaggyl and chloramphenicol in vain

Doctor Y: Do you cough?

Patient X: Yes, I do, but not so much.

Doctor Y: Do you have any skin rash at the onset of this illness?

Patient X: Yes, but it has disappeared

Doctor Y: Any fever?

Patient X: No, but occasionally I used to feel like I'm having malaria

Doctor Y: Alright, before anything we would have to do series of test on you.

(motioning to the patient to stay outside)

Patient X (cut in): Doctor will I be admitted because I want to be under medical care in the hospital. Money is not my problem.

Doctor Y: Just go and stay outside and relax. I will send you to the laboratory first before any treatment. (Doctor to the orderly) take this card to the laboratory head, I have written some laboratory investigations that are to be carried out on the patient including '3'3'3' screening. (To the patients' relations) please take her to the laboratory. I have sent her card down.  
( Called in the next patient).

Text 3 has as its field a doctor- patient consultative session. The doctor queries the patient on her health condition; the latter responds, based on her experience of the disease. This consultation is marked by four types of lexical occurrences, namely: jargon, e.g. diarrhoea, chloramphenicol; plain words, e.g. onset, admitted, etc; figures e.g. 333 and code e.g. '3'3'3' screening. The jargon selected describes symptoms of the disease from which the patient suffers, the drug taken, etc. The plain words point to the duration of the disease in question, hospital procedures, etc. The figures and code form part of the doctor's diagnosis, which is being processed for scientific exactitude in the laboratory. In fact, "3'3'3' screening" is a synonym for "HIV test". The only type of lexical collocation exhibited in Text 3 is the free/ loose type. Examples of this are: persistent diarrhea, taken flaggyl, medical care, etc. Each of these, especially the initial choices, can be replaced by other lexical items. The reason for this collocation pattern is found in the pattern of the relationship involved. The doctor obviously is interested in ensuring the success of the communication. Professional lexical collocations would obviously throw the patient into the dark, and the goals of medical consultation would be unachieved.

Syntactically speaking, Text 3 features major and minor sentences. All of simple, compound and complex sentences are featured, but the complex is more prominently featured. This conspicuously points to the influence of context and the cues to which interactants respond. The following instances can be considered:

**Doctor:** Hello Madam, how is your health?

**Patient:** Doctor I am not well at all. I have been sick for more than three months but the problem is that I have been losing weight and I'm having persistent diarrhoea. I have taken flaggl and chloramphenicol in vain.

The doctor's utterance is a simple sentence, cast in form of an interrogative. The patient responds to this question, interpreting it as requesting for details of her history of sickness. These are supplied in a mixture of simple, compound and complex sentences. The minor sentences used appear both in form of statements and interrogatives; e.g. "yes, I do but not so much, any fever, etc. These, of course, are necessitated by the genre in question. Both the indicative and imperative mood types are employed,

but the former is dominant. The indicatives appear both as declaratives and interrogatives. These represent the question- answer nature of hospital consultative sessions. The imperatives, which feature in insignificant number indicate portions of the communication where doctors issue instructions to subordinates or clients to execute hospital procedures. Like Texts 1 and 2, active voice expressions are dominant. This points to the need to identify participants and procedures involved in hospital interactions.

At the level of tenor, Text 3 presents a doctor- patient relationship. Power is unequal as the relationship is purely consultative. The doctor is the superior, authoritative figure in the interaction, seeking information in an interactive mode, not for any intimacy but for procedural purposes. Affective involvement is therefore low. This contrasts however with the situation in traditional medicine where the consultation shows a high affective involvement (cf Adegbite 1991, Odeunmi 2003). Contact is infrequent except in cases where the patient is on admission or on daily or close-range regular appointment, with the doctor.

In terms of mode, Text 3 is marked by spatial/interpersonal distance. The feed back is immediate as responses are needed spontaneously to make medical consultation effective. The channel is the oral medium. This medium is characterized by ellipses/contractions, colloquialisms and a mixture of major and minor sentences. The key is effective as it allows information to be shared appropriately between the doctor and the patient. The genre, of course is consultative.

## Discussion of findings

The findings reveal that at the level of field, the prose text studied (PT), the technical instruction (TI) and the doctor-patient interaction (DPI) are dominated by free/loose collocations, complex sentences and indicative mood. However, PT is particularly marked by borrowing and figurative language usage; DPI by figures, codes, interrogatives and minor sentences; and TI by acronymy, fixed collocations and passive voice expressions. Both DPI and TI are characterized by jargon, plain words and imperatives.

At the level of tenor, there is a writer- reader semi-formal relationship depicted in PT; a doctor-patient formal relationship in DPI; and a manufacturer- user formal relationship in TI. Power is equal and affective involvement is high in PT; but in both DPI and TI, power is unequal and affective involvement is low. Contact is not frequent in both PT and DPI; but it is fairly frequent in TI.

At the level of mode, while PT and TI are marked by experiential distance, DPI is characterized by spatial/interpersonal distance. While the channel of PT and TI are written and generally devoid of colloquialisms and slang, that of DPI is spoken and replete with colloquialisms. However, TI and in certain cases (though not found in our sample), DPI are peculiarly marked by technical abbreviations. Finally, the three texts exhibit different general complexions: PT is narrative, DPI is consultative and TI is instructive.

## Conclusion

It is possible to generalize from the foregoing that (i) literary texts, technical instructions and doctor-patient interactions are analyzable into the dimensions of field, tenor and mode; (ii) these texts exhibit different fields, divergent relationships (tenor) and varying or shared modes, each of which are further marked by other related or dissimilar features such as vocabulary, syntax, power, affective involvement, contact, distance (spatial or experiential), key, channel and genre. These dimensions primarily and ultimately provide us with clear meanings of the texts and the different attitudes that are expressed through the use of language. To a large extent, the features identified for PT and TI, with few exceptions in general peculiarities and minute details, can be generalized for most written texts, and the features noted for DPI can, with the same consideration, be extended to a large number of oral text.



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