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A special language as a collection of registers: A methodological proposal

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Abstract. This paper aims to propose a methodological approach to studying lexico-grammatical variation within special languages. Drawing on evidence from football language, the author argues that a special language has a two-level structure, i.e. it is composed of several subdomains (areas of communicative activity), within which it is possible to distinguish registers (varieties linked with particular situations of use), which are marked by distinctive features of grammar and vocabulary. The register perspective is viewed as a useful tool for accounting for patterns of variation.

Keywords. Football language, lexico-grammatical features, register, special language, sports language, variation.

1. Introduction

Special language (SL)¹ studies have long ceased to be associated solely with purely terminological aspects. The view that it is more appropriate to speak of special terminologies rather than languages (cf. Pieńkos 1993: 262 for more details) was rejected by most analysts already in the 1970s. As Hoffmann (1979: 13-14) puts it, “[w]hat must be criticized [...] is the identification of LSP and terminology, i.e., the reduction of LSP to the lexical level [...]. The isolation of words results in an obvious neglect of syntactic and textlinguistic features that cannot be missed in a complex analysis of LSP”. Gruzca (2004: 13, 28) argues strongly in favor of isolating terminology from the linguistics of specialist languages as he views the two areas as separate fields of inquiry. In his historical overview of German SL studies, he attributes the development of new research perspectives to the influence of text linguistics in the 1970s and 1980s. SL research has come to embrace a number of linguistic levels, such as: morphology, syntax, lexis, style, semantics, pragmatics, discourse, and genre (cf. Sager et al. 1980; Basturkman and Elder 2004; Gruzca 2004; Ufot 2013).

While some researchers (e.g. Sager et al. 1980) restrict the use of SL to communication among experts in a particular field, others (e.g. Picht and Draskau 1985; Roelcke 2005) argue that special language can occur in a broader range of communicative settings². Since it is the latter approach that will be applied in this paper, the following definition of special language will be used as a basis for further analysis.

LSP is a formalized and codified variety of language, used for special purposes and in a legitimate context – that is to say, with the function of communicating information of a specialized nature at any level – at the highest level of complexity, between initiated experts, and, at lower levels of complexity, with the aim of informing or initiating other interested parties in the most economic, precise and unambiguous terms possible. (Picht and Draskau 1985: 3)

It follows then that special languages are marked by internal variation, which means that within most of them it is possible to identify several subvarieties that differ among each other in the degree of complexity or abstraction³. Needless to say, these subvarieties of special languages exhibit quantitative linguistic differences (naturally, SL subtypes do not have their own grammars but they often show preferences for specific grammatical structures). However, the scope of

internal variation within SLs seems to have been neglected in research to date.

The present contribution aims to offer a solution to this problem by proposing a three-stage framework for analyzing linguistic differences within a particular special language. Drawing on evidence from the investigation of the language of football, I argue that an SL is composed of several subdomains within which it is possible to identify registers that are marked by sets of lexico-grammatical features. It is hoped that this approach can be utilized in future studies of other domain-specific languages.

2. Register approach

Prior to outlining the framework, it seems vital to provide a very brief overview of register theory. The concept of register was introduced into linguistic discourse by M.A.K. Halliday, who made a distinction between *dialect* and *register*, calling the former “a variety according to the user” and the latter “a variety according to the use” (Halliday 1978: 35). As he puts it, “a register is a variety defined by reference to the social context – it is a function of what you are doing at the time” (Halliday 1978: 157). Halliday also argues that a particular register is determined by three controlling variables: field (the subject matter and the activity of the speaker(s) and participants), tenor (the relationship between the participants) and mode (the channel of communication: spoken or written).

Hence, register is a variety of language which is used in a particular communicative setting. It is “a conventional way of using language that is appropriate in a specific context, which may be identified as situational (e.g. in church), occupational (e.g. among lawyers) or topical (e.g. talking about language)” (Yule 2007: 210-211). Wales (2001: 337) defines register in terms of communicative competence: it is natural for every speaker to alter their language (relative to the type of activity in which they are engaged) by selecting linguistic features (of phonology, grammar, lexis, etc.) that serve specific communicative purposes.

Space restrictions prevent a more detailed overview of the concept of register⁴. However, for the purposes of this paper, it seems necessary to discuss a recent framework for register analysis proposed by Biber and Conrad (2009), who contrast register with the related concepts of genre and style.

Central to Biber and Conrad’s framework is the generally shared view that lexico-grammatical features of registers are situationally determined and functionally motivated. In other words, their approach foregrounds the impact of extralinguistic factors on language choices. Register analysis is composed of the following three stages:

- (1) describing the situational characteristics of the register;
- (2) analyzing the typical linguistic characteristics of the register;
- and (3) identifying the functional forces that help to explain why those linguistic features tend to be associated with those situational characteristics. (Biber and Conrad 2009: 47)

Regarding the situational characteristics of registers, the two analysts draw on previous frameworks (e.g. Hymes 1974, Biber 1988), and propose the following set of seven variables determining language use (the list below includes only major features within each variable):

- **participants** - addressor(s) and addressee(s);
- **relations among participants** - interactiveness, social roles (relative status/power), personal relationship (friends/strangers), the amount of shared knowledge (specialist or non-specialist);
- **channel** – speech/writing, specific medium (permanent/transient);
- **production circumstances** - real time / planned / scripted / revised and edited;
- **setting** – is the time and place of communication shared by participants? Is the place private or public?

- **communicative purposes** – general purposes (e.g. narrate, persuade, entertain, etc.), specific purposes, expression of stance;
- **topic** – general topic domain and specific topic (Biber and Conrad 2009: 40-47).

According to Biber and Conrad, in order to select typical lexico-grammatical features for investigation (e.g. clause types, verb tenses, adverbials, modal verbs, vocabulary features, etc.), register analysts should take into account three considerations. The first aspect is the need for a comparative approach, which is central to the identification of potential register features and register markers. The former are lexical and grammatical characteristics that are pervasive (i.e. they regularly occur in various text samples in the register) and frequent (i.e. they occur more commonly in the investigated register than in other registers). Register markers, in turn, are words and phrases that are specific to the target register, and are rarely, if at all, found in other registers⁵. To identify salient register features and markers, it is necessary to compare text samples from the target register to the language from another register.

The second aspect that needs to be addressed is the need for quantitative analysis. Since not all registers have distinctive register markers, researchers need to focus on the occurrence rates of register features. “Analysis of register features requires consideration of the extent to which a linguistic structure is used”. (Biber and Conrad 2009: 56).

The final consideration is the need for a representative sample of texts. The size of text corpora is dependent on the kind of linguistic features that are investigated. If researchers are interested in less frequent characteristics, then they need to compile a larger sample of texts.

The last stage of register analysis is called the functional interpretation. Once the situational and lexico-grammatical features have been identified and described, “[t]he task now is to match the two up, explaining why particular linguistic features are associated with situational characteristics. This step is interpretive; you must explain why these linguistic features are especially common in this situational context”. (Biber and Conrad 2009: 64)

In the latter part of their work Biber and Conrad provide several examples of register studies drawing on the above framework. In the subsequent section it will be shown how this approach is applicable to SL research.

3. Investigating variation within a special language: evidence from football language

3.1. Football language subdomains

In Lewandowski (2013) I argue that the language of football is a special language with broad public appeal. This view is shared by other analysts (cf. Taborek 2012; Bergh and Ohlander 2012).

It follows that football language, the original variety of which is football English, is indeed a special language, albeit somewhat unusual in that its use is not restricted to a relatively small number of specialists. On the contrary, it may well be argued that it is the most widespread special language of all as far as the number of people using it, in different parts of the world, is concerned. This also means that, despite its function as a special language, football language is arguably, more than any other, also a public language, a somewhat paradoxical state of affairs (Bergh and Ohlander 2012: 14)

Drawing on the previous typologies of sports and football language (cf. Tworek 2000; Burkhardt 2006; Taborek 2012; Bergh and Ohlander 2012) in my book on the language of football (Lewandowski 2013: 45) I identified the following subdomains of football language:

1. the language of football rules and regulations;
2. the language of the science of football;

3. the language of football players and coaches;
4. the language of match officials (referees and their assistants);
5. the language of football journalism;
6. the language of TV football programs;
7. the language of radio football programs;
8. the language of online live football commentary;
9. the language of football fans.

3.2. Football language registers

Within most of the aforementioned subdomains it is possible to single out specific registers, which are listed in Tab. 1. Space restrictions prevent a detailed discussion of these registers (cf. Lewandowski 2013 for more in-depth analysis). A very brief description of the kind of communication that takes place is provided in Column 3.

Subdomain	Register	Remarks
the language of football rules and regulations	football rules and regulations	documents issued by football governing bodies
the language of football players and coaches	on-field communication	communication during a football game among players themselves and between coaches and players
	on-field communication	used during training sessions (primarily by coaches giving instructions)
	post-match interviews	post-match interaction between media representatives and footballers/coaches
the language of match officials	on-field communication	interaction among match officials themselves and between match officials and players/coaching staff
the language of football journalism	match reports	written with the benefit of hindsight, published in newspapers or online
the language of TV football programs	live television football commentary	reporting of the unfolding action on the field of play followed by analysis and interpretation
the language of radio football programs	live radio football commentary	reporting of the unfolding action (less scope for analysis as the addressees are lacking in visual cues)
the language of online live football commentary	minute-by-minute reports (MBMs)	posted online in real time; drawing on the generic and linguistic conventions of the other media registers

Table 1: Registers of football language

All of the football language registers are marked by distinctive features of discourse, style, grammar and vocabulary (as well as generic conventions in the case of the media registers), which result from different situational characteristics. However, what all of the identified varieties share is a common terminological core (basic football terms and general sports terms). There is also a certain amount of lexico-grammatical overlap between some registers. For example,

players and coaches giving post-match interviews use phrases and structures that are typically found in the media registers, while football commentators, some of whom are coaches or former footballers, occasionally color their speech with informal or slang terms from the registers of on-field communication and coaching.

A careful reader will notice that no registers have been found in two of the nine subdomains referred to in 3.1, i.e. the language of the science of football and the language of football fans. The former is a highly diverse field within which it is practically impossible to identify specific varieties with typical linguistic characteristics. The science of football is interdisciplinary in nature, which is why its language draws on lexical items from other domains, e.g. medicine, physics and biology. The language of football fans, in turn, seems to call for a different research perspective: namely, it can be investigated as a language of subculture (cf. Kołodziejek 2006).

3.3. Analysis of register features

Once major SL registers have been identified, the next stage is quantitative and qualitative analysis of their linguistic characteristics. In my study of football language, three media registers, i.e. football match reports, live TV football commentary and online written football commentary (MBMs) have been investigated more thoroughly in terms of their lexico-grammatical features. Tab. 2 shows only selected quantitative findings.

Linguistic feature	Match reports	Live TV commentary	MBMs
Present tense	10.8	75.0	86.0
Past tense	67.4	23.9	7.2
Time adverbials	25.3	22.3	16.2
Time clauses	13.0	2.9	7.2
Possibility modals	3.4	5.0	4.1
Necessity modals	2.7	3.3	2.9
Evaluative adjectives	8.4	10.8	9.0

Table 2: Normed rates of occurrence (per 1,000 words) for selected lexico-grammatical features of three media registers of football language

In line with Biber and Conrad's (2009) approach, linguistic features should be correlated with situational characteristics of the investigated registers. Tense usage in the three media registers of football language is strongly associated with production circumstances (since TV commentary and MBMs are produced in real time, it is present tense verb forms that predominate in these two registers) and communicative purposes (the pervasiveness of the past tense in match reports serves narrative purposes, which is a distinctive feature of news stories, while the use of the present tense in TV commentary and MBMs is supposed to get the audience involved in the ongoing action⁶). Necessity and possibility modals as well as evaluative adjectives, which are regarded as markers of attitudinal stance, are more commonly used in TV commentary than in match reports and MBMs. This implies TV commentators are more concerned with the expression of personal views than sportswriters and MBM reporters.

4. Conclusion

As has been shown in the previous section, special language internal variation can be successfully explored. The investigation process is composed of the following three major stages:

1. distinguishing SL subdomains, i.e. communicative areas that correspond to various fields of professional activity;
2. identifying registers (situationally-motivated varieties with distinctive lexico-grammatical features and markers) within these subdomains;

3. analyzing the register features (both quantitatively and qualitatively) in a contrastive perspective to show the range of variation, and correlating them with the situational characteristics of the registers.

It seems then that register is a useful construct for analyzing intra-language variation. Under this approach, a special language can be investigated as a conglomerate of registers which share some common elements (core terminology), but also exhibit differences between each other.

The register perspective should thus aid research into the lexico-grammatical aspects of special languages⁷. This methodological proposal can be applied in studies of other SLs, especially in such domains as law, medicine, religion or business.

5. Notes

¹ I have chosen to use the term *special language* (SL) rather than *language for special/specific purposes* as the latter concept tends to be associated mainly with (foreign) language teaching.

² According to Möhn and Pelka (1984), there are three types of specialist communication: 1) among experts in the field (*fachinterne*), 2) among experts from various fields (*interfachliche*), and 3) between experts and lay people or non-experts (*fachexterne*).

³ As Sager et al. (1980: 65) argue, special messages exhibit differences “in the degree of speciality of reference”.

⁴ For more insights into register theory, see Ghadessy (1988), Biber and Finegan (1994), Biber and Conrad (2009), and Lewandowski (2010).

⁵ Examples of register features in TV football commentary include present tense verb forms, time and place adverbials and evaluative adjectives. Sample markers in the same register are such phrases as: *open the scoring*, *find the net*, and *the final whistle*.

⁶ According to Williams (2002: 1237), the use of the present tense in commentary is “a means of enhancing the dramatic nature of the event”.

⁷ Nowak-Michalska (2012: 36-39) provides an overview of major morphological and syntactic features of Polish and Spanish legal texts, arguing that grammatical characteristics of legal languages in both countries are rarely investigated.

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