

TELEGRAPHIC REGISTERS IN WRITTEN ENGLISH

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1. TELEGRAPHIC REGISTERS. Of all the registers available to speakers of English, there are a great many in which economy of expression, or brevity, plays an important role--certainly a greater role than it plays in desultory conversation, expository prose, and many other forms of the language. Our purpose in this paper is to examine such *telegraphic* registers in written English, and to draw from them some general observations about registers, in particular about the relationship between the linguistic forms appropriate to a register, the settings in which the register is used, and the uses the forms are designed to serve in those settings.

The inventory of telegraphic registers in written English is considerable, and we shall be drawing illustrations from several different types: writing that is transparently a shortened version of some other text (telegrams, newspaper headlines, abstracts and summaries, some brief letters), other registers supplying information (lists of ingredients or parts, menu entries, schedules, classified ads, catalogue entries, footnotes, resumés, field guide entries, certain graffiti), some registers used for naming items (identifying signs or labels, titles of stories or films), some asking for information (questionnaires and official forms), and some giving instructions (road signs, instructions for use or assembly, recipes).

We assume from the outset the familiar distinction between *register* and *style*, according to which registers have a significant component of context-specificity, whereas styles are distributed in a wide variety of contexts according to such dimensions as casualness, familiarity and politeness. Newspaper headlines or menu entries can be framed in formal or in casual style, depending upon the intentions of the original writer, so that the register distinction and the style distinction are cross-cutting.¹

We also assume that register is a concept with three component aspects: linguistic *form* (the particular orthographic, phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic, or discourse-structural choices that the register requires, favors, disfavors, or forbids), extra-linguistic *context* (the settings in which these forms are appropriate), and the *function* or functions associated by speakers/writers with those forms in those contexts. That is, we assume that registers are triply articulated in the sense that morphemes and sentence types are doubly articulated (morphemes as phonological form and meaning, sentence types as morphosyntactic form and use).

Our interest in telegraphic written registers arises in part from the fact that they are particularly clear cases of triple articulation: in examples like those in (1) below, the association

of formal features (like the absence of first person pronouns and various prepositions), context (in telegrams), and function (communicating a request in a small space) is obvious.

- (1) Wooster
Berkeley Mansions
Berkeley Square
London

Come immediately. Serious rift Madeline and self. Reply.
GUSSIE

Surprised receive no answer my telegram saying Come immediately serious rift Madeline and self. Reply.
GUSSIE

I say, Bertie, why don't you answer my telegrams? Sent you two today saying Come immediately serious rift Madeline and self. Unless you come earliest possible moment prepared lend every effort effect reconciliation, wedding will be broken off. Reply.

GUSSIE

(P.G. Wodehouse, *The Code of the Woosters*, ch.2)

2. MARKEDNESS. Many linguistic forms are *stylistically marked*, in that they are appropriate only in certain styles and therefore contrast with such stylistically unmarked features as (in English) adjective-noun order: the English inverted counterfactual construction of

- (2) Were he here, he would be pleased.

is stylistically marked as belonging to formal style, and the topicalization construction of

- (3) Fava beans I can't eat.

is stylistically marked as belonging to casual style.²

In the same way some forms are *registrally marked*, in that they are appropriate only in certain registers and therefore contrast with the forms of ordinary conversation or expository writing. Thus, many characteristic features of particular telegraphic registers cannot be carried over into more neutral settings. Even personal letters, which seem at first glance very close to conversational style, show features that are limited to written, rather than spoken, discourse. The common conversational deletions of first and second person pronoun subjects and of auxiliaries are made--

- (4) Seen any good movies lately?

but words that would be completely pronounced in speech are often abbreviated to initial letters, and the copula is omitted where it would not be in speech:

- (5) E. & J. v. pleased w. his promotion.

is not an unusual letter-writer's sentence, even in a five-page letter, while even in a three-minute trans-Atlantic telephone call one would *say*

- (6) Ed and Janet are very pleased with his promotion.

Similarly, though a recipe may instruct

- (7) Cook slowly until tender, turning and basting occasionally, one to one and one-quarter hours.

(Craig Claiborne, *New York Times Cook Book* (Harper & Row, 1961, p. 199)

a person describing the process to someone else would *say* not (7) but rather something along the lines of

- (8) Cook it slowly until it's tender, turning and basting it occasionally, for one to one and one-quarter hours.

(foregoing the object deletions and other reductions of (7)). And though the label says

- (9) Apply to affected parts.

the pharmacist tells you how to use the stuff with wording like

- (10) Apply this to the affected parts.

(foregoing the object deletions and article deletion of (9)).

It is less obvious but also true that it is often impossible to carry over the features of one telegraphic register into another. Recipe writers can omit object pronouns when the referent is supplied by the context, as in (7), but letter writers cannot:

- (11) Saw *Manhattan* last night. *We all loved.

Labels typically leave out any reference to *this* (referring to the object the writing or printing is on, or to that object's contents) (Sadock 1974), but letters may not: an indiscreet love note says

- (12) Burn this!

and not simply

- (13) Burn!

Cookbooks differ in their use of orthographic abbreviations, though most abbreviate quantities--

- (14) 3 tsp. chili powder

but even the most abbreviative do not seem to go as far as grocery lists and abbreviate ingredient names:

- (15) 1 ckn., 1 pkg. froz. spin.

A further indication of the marked character of these features of telegraphic registers is that registrally unmarked features *may* replace them, while (as we have just seen) the reverse is not the case. Letter writers, cookbook authors, and composers of catalogues *may* choose more neutral forms, offering something like (6) instead of (7).

Even where neutral forms are chosen, however, some marked features may persist. Consider, for example, the following recipe:

- (16) HOW TO POACH AN EGG BY ST. FRANCIS

In 1212 Saint Francis went to the Holy Land. When he came back he taught his followers a simple way to prepare poached eggs for a meal.

This is still the best known method to poach an egg. Take a one quart cooking pot and fill it three-fourths full of water. Put it on your stove and bring to a boil. Carefully crack an egg and put it into a small drinking glass. Stir a

good whirlpool into the water with a tablespoon, then carefully pour the egg into the center of the whirlpool from the drinking glass. The egg will settle evenly on the bottom of the pan. Gently simmer the egg for 5 minutes if you want it with a soft center or 7 minutes if you want it with a cooked center. Then remove the pot from the stove and pour off all of the water. The poached egg will remain in the bottom of the pan. Lift the egg from the bottom of the pan with a spoon. Salt and pepper to taste.

(George Leonard Herter and Berthe E. Herter, *Bull Cook and Authentic Historical Recipes and Practices* (Herter's, Waseca, Minn., 1960 , pp. 131-2)

Even in this conspicuously unabbreviated writing, where *from the drinking glass* and *from the bottom of the pan* are somewhat superfluously included, there are switches into the recipe register--one close to the beginning (in the second sentence: *and bring to a boil*), the other at the very end (*salt and pepper to taste*). Some recipe writers who otherwise adhere to the traditional recipe register, and to the standardized format which first lists ingredients and then gives directions, may shift away from characteristic registral features to provide additional information, as in the following example:

- (17) Sprinkle with bread crumbs and bake 30 minutes at 375°, though it does not seem to affect it to stay in oven longer.

(*River Road Recipes* (Junior League of Baton Rouge, La., 1962 , p. 118)

And writers of lavatory graffiti proposing sexual liaisons occasionally write in (somewhat unpunctuated) conversational prose, but with lapses into the formulas of the register, as in the last line of the following example:³

- (18) I am 6'1" slim 19 yrs. old
and have 8" hard cock only
problem is I can only
come here from 8-10 AM.
Can any other *young slim*
guys come meet me?
Make date, time

3. CONVENTIONALIZATION. Because these are telegraphic registers we are discussing, they are all characterized to some degree by *deletions* and orthographic *abbreviations*. No one register--except perhaps that of private note-taking--seems to use all conceivable curtailments, however: a catalogue offering many items for sale may list dress sizes as

- (19) S - M - L

but write out *quart* in

- (20) 7 quart roasting pan

and a cookbook calling for a

- (21) 3-qt. casserole

would not also require

- (22) 1 s. chicken.

In fact, *no* telegraphic register appears to abandon morphological marks that are redundant: subject-verb agreement is not given up (a telegram or headline may announce POPE ARRIVES TOMORROW, but not *POPE ARRIVE TOMORROW), nor the past participle suffix (DRIVE HAS SUCCEEDED, not *DRIVE HAS SUCCEED), nor the plural suffix after cardinal number words (SIXTEEN CANDIDATES IN CONTEST, not *SIXTEEN CANDIDATE IN CONTEST), though these reductions are made in various 'simplified' forms of English, such as English-based pidgins.

What we have seen in examples like (11)-(13) above is that each register has its own principles as to what may be left unsaid and what may not, and that it is not, in general, possible to predict, merely on the basis of a need for economy, what those principles are. Since registers differ in the principles that govern their forms, even where similar external motives are in force, and since no telegraphic register seems to follow blindly the simpleminded principle, 'don't print what could reasonably be predicted', we conclude that the principles of registral form are, at least in part, *conventional*. The conventions are by no means utterly arbitrary, but they are conventions.⁴

Even when the constraints of brevity are removed, the characteristic features of our telegraphic registers tend to persist, a fact that points to their conventional, and not fully utilitarian, nature.⁵ As we point out in our study of menu entries (Zwicky and Zwicky 1980), even unwieldy objects like the 17" x 19 1/2" bill of fare of the Gold Room in Tucson contain no more material than much smaller menus, and the entries follow the usual form for their register, as in

- (23) ENTRECÔTE AU POIVRE MADAGASCAR
Sirloin steak topped with green peppercorn, served
with cream sauce and cognac

Similarly, graffiti advertising sexual favors sometimes stand in great expanses of painted partition, but nevertheless conform to the conventions:

- (24) Also
married
& would
like to
get together
5-6 p.m.
name
place & time

The conventions of registral form permit, as we have seen, features not usable in other settings. They also favor the use of certain features beyond their frequency in neutral settings. And they supply fixed formats for certain purposes. The newspaper headline register, for instance, permits the use of the present for the perfect--

- (25) Korean President (New York *Times*,
Is Gunned Down 2- October 1979)
By 'Accident'

favors noun-noun compounding way beyond its frequency in ordinary speech or writing--

- (26) Investigators seek (Ohio State *Lantern*,
plane crash cause 2 November 1979)

and supplies a special format for brief quotations--

(27) Boyland: 'Moody
catering to elite'

(Ohio State *Lantern*,
29 October 1979)

In these respects, registers are like literary forms and styles, with their deviant features, statistical emphases on particular features of common language, and special formal requirements. Inasmuch as economy is also a prominent motive in poetry, the telegraphic registers we have been considering should resemble poetic forms and styles. But in fact the resemblances do not go beyond the points just detailed. The manifest differences have to do with the very different *functions* of poetry and our telegraphic registers, functions that combine with or conflict with the brevity motive. We turn now to these functions.

4. FUNCTIONS IN CONFLICT. Sometimes material appears in a telegraphic register even though it is uninformative or redundant. For example: classified ads for apartments for rent (usually written by the would-be landlords) very often just give information about the number of rooms, whether appliances are included, whether the tenant is to pay the utility bills, and what sort of tenant is desired, though even then the adjectives *nice* and *clean* appear more often than these informative purposes might suggest--but when real estate professionals are offering houses for sale, they use their conventional shorthand to list the actual features of the house

(28) LR, WBFP, sep. DR, 3 BR, bsmt⁶

while at the same time lengthening the descriptions with such adjectives as *sharp*, *super*, *great*, and *fabulous*. Similarly, menu writers save space with such entries as (23), which lacks an indefinite article for *sirloin steak* and a conjunction between *topped with green peppercorn* and *served with cream sauce and cognac*, while on other occasions their descriptions abound with adjectives like *tasty*, *fresh*, *hot*, *sizzling*, *crunchy* and *natural*. Why should this be?

Clearly, a motive other than brevity or informativeness is at work here, namely *advertisement*. The uninformative adjectives serve the intended function of making some offered item attractive to potential purchasers or users. Many telegraphic registers are also advertisements, and the resulting conflict of motives leads to a blend of curtailed syntax with extended verbiage. This conflict is very clear in catalogues, which (from the most practical to the most frivolous, the smallest to the largest, the cheapest to the most expensive) must serve as advertisements, since all catalogue makers are selling something. In fact, in a house full of many dozens of catalogues, we have not been able to find one that merely describes its merchandise in factual terms and lists prices and shipping weights. A typical case is the small, crowded catalogue of tools and gadgets (catalogue #6 for Mother's General Store in Flat Rock, N.C.) which restrains itself on page 30 to

(29) CD-30S Stainless Steel Garlic Press Shipping wt.8 oz.
\$3.50

but runs amok on the next page with this account of an apple peeler:

(30) We were forced to drop this apple peeler from our catalogue a couple of years ago, when the manufacturer stopped its production. Now we are able to offer this valuable tool again in response to hundreds of requests from our customers. The apple peeler is

made of durable cast iron and will pare, core, and slice an apple in one five-second operation. The design was patented 100 years ago, and no better model has ever been developed. It's now produced for us by a leading manufacturer of quality household tools. We're very pleased that this important item is once again available.

The advertising motive appears where one might not expect it, as in captions for newspaper photographs, which may be intended less to identify a particular picture than to tie it into a story and to use it to lead readers to that story. For example, a photograph in the *New York Times Magazine* of 14 October 1979 shows Senator Henry Jackson surrounded by microphones on an unidentified industrial site. The caption reads

- (31) Senator Jackson: 'The facts are--we do not have the facts.'

It is not clear that the picture presents the senator in the act of saying just that, and indeed stock photos of public figures may be used again and again over captions pointing to current stories.

The advertising motive has often caused the importation of foreign words and phrases into English, either to add an exotic aura to a product (as in a recipe book's *shrimp au vin*) or to disguise its actual nature, as when rabbit fur is *lapin* or leg of goat is called *cabrito*. The French language, in particular, has long been associated with fine food and drink and elegant, fashionable clothes--so a bit of French may add prestige to a dress, a recipe, or a wine. The trick is to let people know you're offering them something French without burdening them with the necessity of knowing much French. A matchbook from a French restaurant in Columbus, Ohio shows a particularly economical use of real French to appeal to connoisseurship without straining linguistic capabilities. The front of the matchbook says

- (32) L'Armagnac
RESTAURANT FRANCAIS
121 SOUTH SIXTH STREET
COLUMBUS, OHIO

The back says

- (33) Déjeuner 11:30-2 p.m.
Dîner --by reservation only
Téléphone 221-4046
Closed Sunday and Monday

Déjeuner is made understandable by the stated hours; *dîner* and *téléphone* are almost English; and all the unpredictable information is in English alone. They've used real, identifiable French, they haven't had to repeat anything, and they've conveyed the information they wanted people to know. A more simplistic method is to use fake French, often just a French article followed by an English noun, as in the disturbing Renaults labelled *Le Car*; if you read the label as real French, these little automobiles are claiming to be interurban buses.

There are other motives besides advertisement that conflict on occasion with the economy motive. For example, headlines that preserve the copula, like

- (34) Accident Victim Is Allowed to Die

(35) State Planning Agency
Spending Is Criticized

(Columbus *Dispatch*,
14 October 1979)

do so to fill a line or even the length of lines. Such requirements for a special format may take precedence over the strictest economy in words or spaces.

Still another motive, though one much less prominent in telegraphic registers than in poetry, is that of expressiveness, evidenced in such unlikely places as *The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds, Eastern Edition*, which (while being restricted in space by the requirements that the user should be able to carry the book about with her easily and consult it almost anywhere) sometimes provides useless but fascinating pieces of information, such as that the vermilion flycatcher is called *bravita de fuego* 'little coal of fire' in Spanish. The advertisements for sexual favors show (somewhat surprisingly) some inclination towards alliteration as an expressive device:⁷

(37) hot and horny, hung and hairy, no fags or fems

5. REFRAMINGS. As a final remark, we would like to point out that material belonging to one register is sometimes framed as being presented in another, as when display ads are framed as newspaper headlines (as 'hot news')--

(38) ISPANKY SCULPTURE
NOW IN BRONZE!

(Joel Meisner & Co. ad, *New Yorker* of 15 October 1979)

(39) Accurate,
easy reading
tire gauge
saves gas.

(Brookstone Co. ad, *New Yorker* of 15 October 1979)

or when sexual advertisements are framed in classified ad format--

(40) Seeking married
man 25-40 yrs.
for good sex
am same
leave date/time

The fact that the forms of these registers can be employed in this way underscores the extent to which readers of English are able to connect particular forms to their registral settings and uses. Just as people can switch styles, they can switch registers. And just as they can achieve an effect by employing, say, informal style in a formal setting, so they can achieve an effect by employing the form of one register outside the setting specific to that register. That is, these reframings are analogous to indirect speech acts (*I'd like a bagel*) and displaced uses of grammatical categories (*Mr. Smith, it's time for our bath*).

NOTES

1. Some writers (for example, Robinson 1972:35) have criticized the concept of register because the term has on occasion been applied carelessly and vaguely. In fact, there is a series of cases, ranging from those like 'the language of baseball fans', characterized by certain marked lexical items and a

relatively heavy use of some syntactic constructions, to those like 'baby talk', characterized by a wide range of phonological, lexical, morphological, syntactic, and discourse-structural features. The association of form, setting and function is very loose in the former cases, but quite close in the latter. It seems entirely appropriate to have a piece of terminology for referring at least to the latter sort of phenomenon, in which case the telegraphic forms we are considering will certainly be classed as registers. The decision about how to class the less clear cases is essentially terminological, involving a decision as to whether the word *register* is usefully extended to them or whether some new word should be devised; the terminological problem is familiar in linguistics from such cases as *dialect*, *morpheme*, *word*, and *sentence*.

2. See Silva and Zwicky (1975) for some further examples from phonology, lexicon, and syntax.
3. This example and others to follow were collected by Arnold Zwicky from Ohio State University men's rooms serving as locales for sexual activity between men--a milieu that has been described from a sociological viewpoint by Humphreys (1975).
4. It might be objected that, though undoubtedly conventional, the principles governing our telegraphic forms are not rules of (some varieties of) language, but represent instead an overlay of rules imposed on language, like the principles of secret languages, language games, or metrical forms. (See the comments by Sherzer (1976) on secret languages and Bierwisch (1970) on poetic forms). Such overlaid rules are often unlike anything in the ordinary morphology or syntax of languages, and they are frequently (perhaps usually) learned through some sort of explicit instruction. They are of interest to linguists because the units of their construction are linguistic units. In contrast, the (non-visual) features of our telegraphic forms--features like the definite object deletion of recipes and the conjunction deletion of headlines--are linguistically unsurprising. And some are (at least on occasion) taught to those who would use them--there are instruction books for headline writers and menu designers, for example--but for most there are few explicit guidelines (most people who compose questionnaires or classified ads have not had principles supplied to them), or no guidelines at all (no one gives instructions to novice graffitists on how to advertise for a sexual partner). The line between a register and an overlaid system is not always easy to draw, but our telegraphic forms seem fairly clearly to fall on the register side of the line. In either case, of course, they would present features worth linguistic analysis.
5. The conventional character of registral form is further supported by the existence of crosslanguage and crossdialect differences in the form of otherwise comparable registers.
6. Translation: living room, wood-burning fire place, separate dining room, three bedrooms, basement.
7. Alliteration is one of the prominent rhetorical figures in the graffiti studied by Frank D'Angelo in a number of articles (for example, D'Angelo 1974).

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