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A typology of language registers

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Foreword

ISO (the International Organization for Standardization) is a worldwide federation of national standards bodies (ISO member bodies). The work of preparing International Standards is normally carried out through ISO technical committees. Each member body interested in a subject for which a technical committee has been established has the right to be represented on that committee. International organizations, governmental and non-governmental, in liaison with ISO, also take part in the work. ISO collaborates closely with the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) on all matters of electrotechnical standardization.

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Introduction

This document aims to clarify ambiguities arising from the use of the term ‘register’ to designate different concepts. It aims to examine different conceptualizations of language registers amongst linguistic theorists so that useful definitions can be agreed on for use in, for example, standardization work. It also aims to contribute to developing new means of providing comprehensive coverage of language variants.

Computational management of language resources requires appropriate descriptors and tags for different language varieties.

A typology of language registers will aid appropriate communication in business and commerce, for example where a marketing campaign needs to address consumers in a friendly, informal register, or in medicine where there is a need to understand clearly the difference between technical communication between professionals on the one hand, and clear and simple communication for public health campaigns on the other.

There is as yet no common agreement on terms and concepts for individual language registers, or way to map their relationship to each other.

As dialects can have a geographic designation, language registers can be designated by their linguistic patterns, both lexico-grammatical and discoursal-semantic patterns associated with situations.

A description of a language register needs to state whether it is a written or a spoken register, or expressed by some other modality. It is therefore multifaceted, and polyhierarchical, fitting in with existing ISO standards such as ISO 24620-1 and ISO 639 in order to attain maximum impact. It lays the groundwork for developing codes for language registers at a future date. This document proposes an overview of all relevant language registers and does not intend to create standards for each individual register. It will, however, help to identify and inform further areas for elaboration.

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A typology of language registers

1 Scope

This document gives the general principles for language registers in both descriptive and prescriptive environments. It defines key concepts and describes examples of different language registers that can be applied across all or many languages and those that are language-specific. It lays down guidelines for the use of appropriate language registers needed in a wide range of environments. These include:

— terminology work, where it contributes to the development of a wide range of standards;

— translation, so that appropriate language levels can be chosen in target languages, to match that of the source language;

— lexicography, to improve descriptors of non-geographic language variants;

— second language teaching and learning, so that students can avoid pitfalls associated with inappropriate language use;

— software, to improve tagging of language variants in computer applications.

2 Normative references

There are no normative references in this document.

3 Terms and definitions

For the purposes of this document, the following terms and definitions apply.

3.1
language variety
largest subset of an individual language that is homogeneous both with regard to a certain criterion for linguistic variation and with regard to a certain structural criterion for linguistic variation

3.2
code switching
changing backwards and forwards between two or more languages or language varieties in conversation

3.3
language register
language variety (3.1) used for a particular purpose or in an event of language use, depending on the type of situation, especially its degree of formality

Note 1 to entry: An individual usually has more than one language register in their verbal repertoire and can vary their use of register according to their perception of what is appropriate for different purposes or domains.

3.4
common register
language register (3.3) used in addressing or referring to non-royal persons

3.5
royal register
language register (3.3) used in addressing or referring to royal persons

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