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Family register in British English: The first approach to its systematic study

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Abstract

The present study looks into an unexplored area of research as it is the family register. An alternative to recording family conversations is the use of popular TV series, as their success lies in the audience's identification with their characters and their communicative style. This work analyses two highly popular series in UK. The results suggest that this register has its own communicative richness and internal variation, the knowledge of which may be of great help for students and professionals travelling to English-speaking countries and living or relating with native speakers in family environments.

1. Introduction

Register Variation (RV), as a communicative parameter, today ranges from simple and popularised binomials such as "formal" or "informal" language, to complex communicative parameters or dimensions difficult to understand and used by speakers outside the area of Linguistics. This heterogeneity and complexity has become an obstacle in the development of practical studies that could transfer their results to the educational and labour market.

The aim of the present study is to try to palliate this trend approaching RV from an all-inclusive and systematic perspective, but that is, at the same time, practical and "user-friendly" (Giménez-Moreno, 2006). This framework is

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based on a few principles that bring together the most significant insights of previous researchers in the area. Firstly, RV's key defining parameters are the communicative settings and the participants' roles, both conventional roles and intentional roles (Giménez-Moreno, 2011b). Secondly, in order to offer a comprehensive account of RV, this field needs to cover all daily communication, from professional to family settings, always keeping the notion of scale and proportion (Halliday, 1988). And finally, corpus analysis within this area needs to focus on searching for a practical set of registers and their distinctive language features, which allows prioritise native speakers' observation and collaboration on the methodological level (Giménez-Moreno and Skorczynska, 2013a).

Under this framework we observed a basic division between public and private life communication, and distinguished four basic macro-registers, two of them used in our public settings (professional and social registers) and other two used in our private life (amicable and family registers). Each of these registers can be expressed in at least three communicative tones: (i) more relaxed and flexible, (ii) neutral or conventional, and (iii) rigid and stereotyped tones (Giménez Moreno, 2006). Depending on their intentions, speakers might use one or several of these tones or shifts from one register to another (Giménez Moreno, 2011a). From this perspective the concepts of "formality" and "informality" are very relative since each register has its own scale of formality. The insights discovered through the analysis of the professional register (Giménez-Moreno, 2011a, 2011b; Giménez-Moreno & Skorczynska, 2013b) are now applied to approach the family register.

2. The "family register"

This register might easily be associated with the term "familect", first mentioned in Meurman-Solin (1999) with reference to the use of the Scottish dialect and its influence on the pronunciation of English within Scottish families. This term has also been used by specialists in Sociolinguistics, such as Crystal (2008) and the linguists from the University of Winchester involved in *The Kitchen Table Lingo*, to refer to the nonstandard terms and expressions that native speakers use in general informal settings. Some of these expressions about everyday communication within family environments have been compiled in slang and urban English dictionaries and reference tools such as *Slang Thesaurus* (Green, 1986) and *Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang* (Ayto & Simpson, 2010).

Additionally, interesting information can be found in studies on child-directed speech (CDS), informally referred to as "babytalk", "motherese" or "parentese" (Matychuk, 2004; Herrera et al., 2004). In family contexts, CDS is not just used with children but also with pets and among adults. In this latter case, it might have a positive function (e.g. flirtatious or caring), but sometimes it can be negative (e.g. derogatory and patronizing). Its main features are: specific childish words for family members and daily functions, diminutives, duplications, incomplete sentences, sign language, peculiar syntax and grammar (e.g. short verbs, nonverbal utterances, repetitions and omissions).

A fourth source of information is the art of argumentation and "modern rhetoric" (Gehrke, 2009). As Walton (2007) points out, persuasion, argumentation, dialectics and rhetoric are indispensable in understanding and analysing informal logic and reasoning. In this sense, the analysis of the family register is expected to contain a certain amount of rhetorical strategies, such as metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, understatement, euphemism, irony and puns.

Another key source of information is research on Conversational Analysis. Although this field covers many types of conversations, there are some studies which point out the key role of some conversational features in family communication (Couper-Kuhlen & Selting, 1996; Enfield & Stivers, 2007; Hutchby & Wooffit, 2008). These features include a peculiar use of prosody and intonation, person reference and other ordinary conversational devices such as humour, together with certain standard adjacency pairs.

Finally, recent research on television programs and dialogues deserves special mention, particularly when containing information related to family settings. For example, Bednarek (2010) analysed the language of fictional television focusing on TV series such as *Gilmore Girls*, and Quaglio (2009) contrasted the language of the American comedy *Friends* with natural conversation extracted from the Longman Grammar Corpus. A key insight is that their results support the fact that modern TV series mirror the core linguistic features of natural conversation.

All this collection of parameters and features related to the language used in family settings helped to design the methodology used for this study.

3. Method and corpus

In order to first approach a systematic analysis of family register in British English, we designed a short questionnaire for incoming British university students on their perception of the register used with family members. The questionnaire enquired about key features collected in our previous research, such as the use of special words or expressions referring to different parts of the body, everyday objects and actions, pets, leisure activities, nicknames, sayings and proverbs, as well as any other frequent compounds or collocations. The questionnaire was answered by 15 British students and provided a preliminary insight into the use of family register.

The results from the questionnaire served to create a checklist of family register language features, which was later used in the analysis of two popular BBC series: *The Royle Family* (RF) and *Gavin & Stacey* (GS). The success of those series lies in the audience's identification with their characters, their stories and their communicative style.

The Royle Family ran from 1998 to 2000, with special episodes until 2012. The series centres around the lives of a Manchester family, the Royles, comprising the family's patriarch Jim Royle, his wife Barbara, their daughter Denise, their son Anthony and Denise's fiancée (later, husband), Dave. All the action in this series takes place within the Royles' home.

Gavin & Stacey is a romantic situation comedy that follows the long-distance relationship of Gavin from Billericay in Essex, and Stacey from Barry in the Vale of Glamorgan, Wales. The series ran from 2007 to 2010 in BBC Three, Two and One, increasing in popularity. Most of the action takes place within the homes of Gavin and Stacey, and later within their common home.

Two episodes from *The Royle Family* and three episodes from *Gavin & Stacey*, accounting for the total of two hours of family encounters, were analysed with the collaboration of a British native speaker.

4. Results and discussion

Table 1 shows the results of the survey on the use of family register by a group of 15 British students. Apart from the number of students who actually observed the use of a particular feature, the table also includes examples provided by those students.

Table 1. Results of British student survey: family register features.

Questionnaire	Data collected
Baby talk	4 students
	eg. *little dog, jammies, kiddy, horsy-doggy*
Body parts	*10 students*
	eg. boobies, tutsies, bumbalina, slippy tongue,
Special words for objects and pets	6 students
	eg. *silly kitty, birdie, poppy*
Special words for habitual tasks	7 students
	eg**.** *hit the sack/hit the hay, take a chat or a leak*
Special words for leisure activities	5 students
	eg. *boot and rally; hit the bottle*
Addressing relatives	14 students
	eg. *lovebird, mimsy, teddy bear, nana, mum babes,*
Compounds/collocates	10 students
	eg. *bees knees, jolly good, quick shower, wee tea*
Sayings & proverbs	8 students
	eg. *don't be a tosser; waste not, want not*

Intonation/rhythm change	12 students
Accent/dialect change	12 students

Apart from the items confirmed by students as a feature of family register, we also included other features in our checklist, such as the use of metaphor and simile, metonymy, hyperbole, euphemisms and insults, irony and understatements, as well as puns (jokes and humour). Table 2 shows the results of the BBC series analysis.

Table 2. Occurrence of family register language features in RF and GS.

Language feature	Total occurrence in 2 hours	Occurrence RF in 1 hour	Occurrence GS in 1 hour
Private setting collocations	206	138	68
Metaphor & similes	118	51	67
Dialect variation	55	31	24
Irony & understatement	40	37	3
Peculiar words: actions	37	37	-
Addressing	37	18	19
Hyperbole	33	22	11
Euphemism & insults	21	13	8
Intonation/rhythm	21	9	12
Peculiar words: objects	18	14	4
Proverbs & sayings	18	11	7
Metonymy	18	7	11
Puns	15	13	3
Child-directed words	8	4	4
Body parts	2	2	-
Peculiar words: animals	-	-	-

As can be seen in Table 2, "private setting collocations" is the most frequent language feature (examples 1-3). These peculiar combinations of words were considerably more frequent in *The Royle Family*. This particular group includes the most fixed expressions and idioms (example 1), and other word combinations with a lower degree of fixation (example 2 and 3).

1. You know what they say about excitement. It's <u>by the by</u>. (GS)
2. <u>Right, well, I'm off, then</u>. (RF)
3. <u>Chuck us that sauce</u>! (GS)

Metaphors and similes were the second most frequent group of language features, distributed evenly for the two series.

4. <u>Sexist pig</u>! (RF)
5. <u>It knocked me for six</u>! (GS)

As can be seen the metaphors used also vary as for the level of transparency: from the most conventional and easy to interpret (example 4) to the most opaque, in the form of an idiom (example 5).

Dialect variation was another relevant feature in the family register used in the two series. The family members in *The Royle Family* used the Northern dialect (example 6), while *Gavin & Stacey* exemplified the Welsh dialect (example 7), in addition to the Essex accent.

6. Test us some more. (RF)
7. She don't want one. (GS)

Irony and understatement were especially frequent in *The Royle Family*. The characters in this series also used many words and expressions referring to everyday actions, such as "Jim, I'm only doing a finger buffet". Different ways of addressing other members of the family included: "sweet cheeks", "little prince", "sweetheart", or "mate". Hyperbole was also detected, but it was less frequent than, for instance, metaphor and simile (example 8).

8. You're eating half a cow, woman! (GS)

Other less frequent features included peculiar words referring to everyday objects, the use of proverbs and sayings, metonymy, puns, child-directed words. Only two expressions were identified for the group of body parts, and no words naming pets were found, as none of the two series featured any animal.

5. Conclusion

The study of two BBC series allowed for the identification of a number of relevant features of family register. Among the most prominent are private setting collocations together with metaphors and similes, very often overlapping in the same language form. An internal variation of formality within the family register, from more ritual to less formal or intimate, was observed in both series. Further research related to family register will focus on building a larger corpus of recorded conversations and conducting a contrastive analysis with the data presented here. The results obtained might be especially useful in understanding communication processes in family contexts with possible applications in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) instruction.

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