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FOLK FORMALITY

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INTRODUCTION. The seed of this paper was planted when I was in fourth grade. My friend Carol was reading aloud her description of a class trip. I recall being both fascinated and slightly amused by Carol's composition. I was fascinated by the familiarity of some of her phrases and constructions, but I kept wanting to giggle because they also sounded oddly stilted. One phrase that stuck in my mind will suggest the type of phrasing I have in mind: She ended her composition with, "A good time was had by all."

This seed began to sprout when I heard Sandy Thompson's excellent paper, "Subordination in Formal and Informal Discourse" at the 1984 Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics. Thompson (1984) follows Chafe (1982, 1984) in distinguishing between formal and informal varieties of spoken and written discourse. She analyzes three discourse types: formal written, informal written, and informal spoken.

For informal written discourse, Thompson used "letters to the editor, personal letters, and chatty pieces about people in a radio program guide" (p. 88). The sample of informal written discourse which she presents is from a personal letter written to her by Cousin Margaret. I will reproduce this excerpt here in numbered units as Thompson segments it (p. 90).

1. Your kind invitation to come and enjoy cooler climes is so tempting
2. but I have been waiting to learn the outcome of medical diagnosis
3. and the next 3 months will be spent having the main thumb joints replaced with plastic ones.
4. Thumbs began to be troublesome about 4 months ago
5. and I made an appointment with the best hand surgeon in the Valley
6. to see if my working activities were the problem.
7. Using thumbs is not the problem
8. but heredity is
9. and the end result is no use of thumbs
10. if I don't do something now.
11. I have heard Mother talk about the family arthritis
12. but one never expects to be included.
13. Writing has almost become impossible
14. so we had the typewriter serviced
15. and I may learn to type decently after all these years.

This writing, it seemed to me, is not exactly informal, although it certainly is not exactly formal either -- not in the same way as Thompson's formal written sample: a memo from the Chancellor's office at UCLA. What Cousin Margaret had written, I felt, was neither formal nor informal but an informal idea of formal writing -- a kind of folk formality. (When I introduced this term at a meeting of the American Anthropological Association, I was asked what I intended the term "folk" to constrast with. The answer is, with professional writers and contexts. In other words, it is "everyday" or "private" formality.)

In order to demonstrate that Cousin Margaret's letter is relatively formal, I rewrote it in a less formal register, in lines corresponding to those of the original.

1. It's kind of you to invite me to visit you and enjoy cooler weather and I'm tempted to accept
2. but I've been waiting to learn the results of some medical tests I've taken
3. and I have to spend the next 3 months having my main thumb joints replaced with plastic ones.
4. I started having trouble with my thumbs about 4 months ago
5. and I made an appointment with the best hand surgeon in the Valley
6. to see if the problem was anything I was doing.
7. It turned out that there's no problem with the way I use my thumbs.
8. It's just heredity
9. and the upshot is that I won't be able to use my thumbs at all
10. if I don't do something now.
11. I've heard Mother talk about the family arthritis
12. but I never thought it would happen to me.
13. It's almost impossible for me to write
14. so we had the typewriter fixed
15. and I may learn to type decently after all these years.

Even this, however, is relatively formal as

language goes: It is monologic; it is written in complete sentences; and the diction, though not elevated, is not slang either. To illustrate written discourse that is still less formal, I will present an example that I have discussed elsewhere (Tannen in press): notes written by a teenage girl to her friend.

(1) a. High! What's up? I'm kool! I'm cranking in science with Norm N. & Nate Noster. Party train up the butt!
    b. You would look so good /w the one and only Tom Baxter! So go for it! He loves you yeah yeah yeah!
    c. [about a friend who got into trouble with a teacher] Karen is dead. Shams! DIES! Dead meat all over the street!

I am suggesting, then, that, as Thompson shows for subordination, formality is not a monolithic dimension. Folk formality is somewhere on a continuum between very formal and very informal.

OVERVIEW. This paper identifies some of the linguistic forms that characterize folk formality. I begin by examining Cousin Margaret's letter and then cite some markers of folk formality found in other samples of discourse I have examined: a family association newsletter, letters to the editor and My Turn columns in Newsweek, personal letters written by older correspondents, Christmas letters, and fundraising letters. I then illustrate a related phenomenon, folk eloquence. Finally, I place my analysis in the framework of Becker's (1984) notion of linguistic competence as knowledge of prior text. Before proceeding, however, I will comment briefly on how the term "formality" and related concepts have been used by others, and how I am using them.

NORMATIVE PRESSURE. Kazazis (1968) describes the way an Athenian high-school graduate whom he calls Socrates spoke to him:

> For about five minutes, Socrates' intonation was all wrong. His tempo was slower than usual. His choice of words betrayed a strong preoccupation with sounding educated and with impressing me: he would select katharevusa words, or at least words generally used in elevated styles of dhimotiki .... In other words, Socrates was speaking his Sunday Greek.

Kazazis notes that Socrates' Sunday Greek was characterized by lexical, syntactic, morphological, and phonological affectations. In the case of Greek, such forms can be seen to derive from an identifiable High register, katharevusa ("puristic"), as described by Ferguson (1959) in his classic paper, "Diglossia."

Kazazis suggests that Socrates put on his Sunday Greek because he felt under "normative pressure" in conversation with an interlocutor he perceived as superior in status. (Perhaps the fact that he was speaking to a language expert was significant as well.) Although English is not characterized by as clearly distinguishable High and Low registers as Greek, nonetheless there are situations in which English speakers feel under normative pressure; that is, they feel they should speak "good English," just as one puts on one's "good clothes" for certain situations. And "good English" seems often to be perceived as formal English.

The language thus produced may be entirely appropriate. Cousin Margaret's letter, for example, would not make anyone squirm; it is clearly a well-written letter. Indeed, Kazazis' description of Socrates' Sunday Greek, quoted above, is not critical, except for the observation, "For about five minutes, Socrates' intonation was all wrong." But one who is not in complete control of the more formal register, like my fourth grade friend Carol, may produce discourse that sounds a little odd. And, of course, individuals differ in expectations about how much and what type of formality is appropriate in any given context.

Labov (1982) also observes the influence of normative pressure in his characterization of the language of a "formal" sociolinguistic interview: "Generally speaking, an interview which has as its professed object the language of the speaker, will rate higher on the scale of formality than most conversation" (p. 61). Awareness of attention to language makes the language produced in the interview more formal.

Irvine (1984) is concerned with "Formality and Informality in Communicative Events." Surveying how sociolinguists, ethnographers of communication, and others have used the term, she distinguishes four aspects of formality: (1) increased code structuring, (2) code consistency, (3) invoking positional identities, and (4) emergence of a central situational focus. She observes that the first aspect, code structuring, is independent of the other

three. It is this aspect of formality that is my concern (although I would prefer, following Becker [1985], to resist the metaphor of language as a code). In other words, I am considering formality to be a conventionalized set of linguistic choices reflecting and constituting register.

FORMALITY AS REGISTER. Ferguson (1985) defines register as "variation conditioned by use." He notes at least three sources of simplification: 1) space-time economy (as in newspaper headlines); 2) addressee incompetence (as in baby talk and foreigner talk); and 3) social distancing, as in the "mother-in-law talk" found in some Australian languages, in which reduced forms are used to show respect.

The relatively formal register I have described is the flip side of this process; in a sense, it is complexification, to use a term coined by Heath (1981). In contexts in which it seems appropriate to sound more formal, complexification is one way to accomplish formality.

CHARACTERISTICS OF FOLK FORMALITY. Which of Cousin Margaret's linguistic choices made her letter sound more formal than the alternative I composed? Markers of formality in her letter include lexical choice, nominalization, article deletion or definite article substitution, use of the impersonal pronoun "one," and formulaic expressions associated with letters of this type. Examples follow.

LEXICAL CHOICE. Cousin Margaret chose words and phrases that sound formal or literary and would not typically be used in conversation:

(2) a. line 1: cooler climes
    b. line 2: outcome (instead of "results")
    c. line 9: the end result (instead of a colloquial expression like "the upshot" or the more current "the bottom line")
    d. line 14: serviced (instead of "fixed")

NOMINALIZATION. Closely related to lexical choice is the nominalization of items that would be expressed by verbs or verb phrases in informal register:

(3) a. line 7: Using thumbs is not the problem (instead of "the way I use my thumbs")
    b. line 9: and the end result is no use of thumbs (instead of "I won't be able to use my thumbs")

Another example of nominalization was written by my aunt who referred, in a letter, to someone's "dedicated commitment toward societal betterment." (The adjectival "societal" is also marked, but that is a different matter.)

ARTICLE DELETION. The behavior of articles is also closely related to both lexical choice and nominalization. Examples from the letter include:

(4) a. line 2: the outcome of medical diagnosis (instead of "a medical diagnosis" or "the results of medical tests")
    b. line 4: Thumbs began to be troublesome (instead of "my thumbs")
    c. line 7: Using thumbs is not the problem (instead of "my use of thumbs" or "using my thumbs")
    d. line 9: and the end result is no use of thumbs (instead of "use of my thumbs" or "my use of thumbs")

DEFINITE ARTICLE SUBSTITUTION. Not only are some articles deleted, but a definite article appears where a less formal register would have a possessive pronoun:

(5) line 3: the main thumb joints (instead of "my main thumb joints")

ONE-CONSTRUCTION. The third person impersonal pronoun is used where the sense refers to Cousin Margaret herself:

(6) line 12: but one never expects to be included (instead of "I never expected to be included"; or the colloquial general, "you never think it will happen to you; or the more personal, less formal formulaic "I never thought it would happen to me")

FORMULAIC EXPRESSIONS. "Your kind invitation," the letter's opener, is a standard way to refer to an invitation; the inclusion of "kind" is therefore formulaic. ("A good time was had by all" is a formulaic closer.)

DEPERSONALIZATION. Most of the elements discussed above have the effect of making the discourse less personal. (This is reminiscent of Chafe's [1982]

finding that writing is characterized by "detachment." Clearly, more formal styles of writing are more detached.)

(7) a. line 3: and the next 3 months will be spent having the main thumb joints replaced with plastic ones (instead of "I will spend the next 3 months having my thumb joints replaced")
b. line 4: Thumbs began to be troublesome about 4 months ago (instead of "I began to have trouble with my thumbs about 4 months ago")

Cousin Margaret's syntax casts months and thumbs in subject position, rather than Cousin Margaret ("I"). As Leanne Hinton observed in discussion following this presentation, the medical topic of this letter may have occasioned the depersonalized stance. Nonetheless, the effect of the strategy of depersonalization is to make the discourse sound more formal. It seems that the formal and the personal are perceived to be incongruent by many Americans.

FORMAL FORMULAS. Some common forms of folk formality are not found in Cousin Margaret's letter. For example, phrases which appear in samples of Newsweek's Letters to the Editor and My Turn columns (typically written by nonprofessional writers) include: "I for one," "How, pray tell," "I certainly hope," "I can only hope," and "I take exception." The formulaicity of the latter phrase is indicated by the following two letters which appear in the same issue of Newsweek:

(8) a. I read the article on Bill Cosby with much delight. He has always been one of my favorite comedians.... However, I take exception to the psychiatrist's advice to him about some scenes in this season's opening show.
b. Thank you for the article on my favorite comedian, Bill Cosby. I take exception, though, to the people who criticize the program because the Huxtables' life-style isn't typical of black families.

Not only the phrase "I take exception" but the opening reference to Cosby as the writer's favorite comedian is similar in the two letters, suggesting a conventionalized discourse pattern.

The repetition of these phrases in adjacent letters signals their formulaicity. Often the

repetition of a word or construction within a single discourse heightens its markedness. For example, note the following statement written by a photographer to accompany an exhibit of his photographs:

(9) To clearly express an idea, be it with words, watercolors, or film, I have found it best to immerse myself in the subject's natural setting, become as inconspicuous as possible, find out what there is to say, eliminate the distractions, then say it -- simple and to the point.
With the camera I see and express things most clearly -- be it an object, a person, a moment, a mood.

The construction "be it" is a folk-formal form, and its repetition reinforces the impression that it is formulaic.

Sometimes grammatical incorrectness is a clue that folk formality is afoot. For example, the second instance of "be it" in (9) violates number agreement: "With the camera I see and express things most clearly -- be it an object, a person, a moment, a mood." If "it" (singular) refers cataphorically to "an object, a person, a moment, a mood," then it cannot agree with the anaphoric referent, "things" (plural). Strictly, the author should have written, "be they objects, people, moments, moods." The lack of grammatical agreement attests that the construction "be it" is formulaic -- found ready made and slipped in rather than spontaneously generated.

Similarly, in (8), the writer of (a) who took exception to the psychiatrist's advice was grammatically correct, but the writer of (b) who took exception "to the people who criticize" was not. Exception is taken to utterances ("I take exception to your point"), not speakers (*"I take exception to you").

Another folk-formal formula is found in (10), the fourth and fifth paragraphs of a fundraising letter, telling how the soliciting organization helped a deaf and blind man.

(10) Several months ago Gus' Tellatouch machine broke beyond repair. He applied to a government program for a new one but there was no funding for that purpose. Other agencies told him that they would try to help but none did. Gus remained very much alone. The Jewish Braille Institute learned of his plight and responded promptly through the

generosity of caring friends.

Gus now has a Tellatouch machine and has literally "reentered the world." We also found that his braille writer and braille watch, which were old when he was given them several years ago, were broken beyond repair. Through the same caring friends the JBI replaced both of these essential aids with new ones in good working order.

The repeated expression "broke(n) beyond repair" is formal in its nominalization (in contrast with "it couldn't be fixed") and the register associated with the word "beyond."

QUOTATION MARKS. Another feature of folk formality seen in this letter is the use of quotation marks to set off an expression ("reentered the world") that is metaphoric but conventionalized (as contrasted with the standard use of quotation marks to set off cited forms or terms from which writers wish to distance themselves). This feature is particularly frequent in my sample family association newsletters, as seen in (11).

(11) a. Our "Founding Members" laid the valid basis on which this family organization is based.
b. Once again I ask you to send me items of news we are all interested & "concerned".
c. In these troubled times of international threats & alienation we turn to old ties & old traditions of the family for a deeper sense of security and "togetherness".
d. I have about twenty-five copies which I will distribute to our members. A real "treat" for you.

Quotation marks are here used not for citation or othewise disclaiming responsibility but for emphasis and to mark words that seem stylized. (See Lakoff 1982 for discussion of diachronic and synchronic variation in use of quotation marks in speaking and writing.)

CAPITALIZATION. In the first of the preceding examples, "Founding Members" is not only enclosed in quotes but also capitalized. Capitalization is another feature of folk formality. In the following letter from San Francisco Mayor Dianne Feinstein to the San Francisco Ballet Company (as reproduced in a Kennedy Center program), one may argue that "Company" is short for the company's name, but there is no grammatical justification for capitalizating City and Congratulations (except that they start with C!? -- but then why not "our nation's Capital"?)

(12) Dear Ballet Members:

I am very pleased to learn that the Company has accepted an invitation to perform in our nation's capital at the Kennedy Center-- where you open for performances on May 14.

All San Franciscans join me in expressing our City's heartfelt Congratulations on this exciting achievement. It demonstrates, once again, how highly regarded the Company is and it presents a marvelous opportunity to share the grace, the skills and magic of ballet with audiences that recognize great talent when they see it.

(13) shows the first and fourth paragraphs of an ad letter inviting the recipient to join a singles organization. 24% of the words in this letter are capitalized, excluding sentence beginnings.

(13) "The Personal Connection" Invites you to join with A Special Group of Singles who have discovered the satisfaction of meeting new and interesting people through the medium of Personal Advertising. Personal Ads are the new and effective alternative for discerning individuals to meet the best among us.

To insure that our early Advertisers receive the Quality Response they Deserve our initial mailing will reach approximately 8,000 Carefully Selected Eligible Men and Women.

The accretion of capital letters at the end, crescendo-like, suggests that capitalization is being used to intensify impact.

(14), the opening paragraphs of a fundraising letter from People for the American Way, contains numerous examples of folk formality.

(14) Dear Friend,

It's an old lesson we learned -- about how every American is entitled to their "day in court." Whether the issue is a traffic ticket or freedom of speech, we were taught to trust that whoever sits behind the bench is fair, impartial, and listens to all the facts before making a decision.

After all, in America judges don't prejudge and they certainly don't pre-swear their loyalty to

any "one" ideology or individual -- or do they?
You might be surprised at the answer. Because a few very powerful people appear to be on the verge of achieving just that -- a purified, loyal, "right-thinking" judiciary.

Quotation marks surrounding "day in court" and "one"; the word "certainly"; and the use of "just that" in the absence of an anaphoric referent for "that," all suggest folk formality. (In contrast, the quotation marks around "right-thinking" aptly identify a pun: Those purporting to be "right-thinking" really aren't, except insofar as they are thinking on the political right.)

FOLK FORMALITY IN CREATIVE WRITING. A subtype of folk formality is associated with creative writing -- fiction and poetry -- that would be judged ineffective by professional writers. A complete taxonomy of forms characterizing ineffective creative writing would constitute another paper, but a few may be mentioned.

FOLK ELOQUENCE. When asked to write a story she had told in conversation, a woman began and ended with a story-like frame. In conversation she had simply launched the story, its coherence supplied by the preceding topic of talk. In writing, however, she felt it appropriate to set a frame in which the story would fit. (Writing typically requires such frame-setting, as discussed in Tannen 1984). Some of the constructions she used in introducing her written narrative seemed to represent a nonprofessional writer's idea of eloquent writing:

(15) I tell the story to share a truth I am no longer able to deny -- death can and does touch every one of us.

"To share" is a construction that might as easily have been spoken, but "To share a truth" seems more lofty in tone. In addition, "no longer," "able," "can and does," and "everyone of us" all establish a literary-like register.

Another marker of folk eloquence is standardly poetic forms:

(16) Time brings its burden of joy and of sorrow
Yet Time comes with healing and hope for the morrow.

As the sun blinks down
This lovely morn
Spirits run free.

Using "morrow" for "tomorrow" and "morn" for "morning" gives these verses an automatic stamp, "poetic" (just as the capitalization of "Time" lends it importance).

The following poem is folk eloquent in a number of ways.

(16) Winter colors
clear in the frozen
landscape.

Northcountry scenes
strangely settled in
on this peaceful citadel
surrounded by a city of hurry
and erstwhile depression.

In addition to the poetic-sounding words "citadel" and "erstwhile", this poem is marked by vague rather than particular images: "landscape," "scenes," "depression".

In a review of May Sarton's The Magnificent Spinster in The New York Times Book Review, Josephine Humphreys criticizes Sarton's use of standardly poetic and vague words instead of novel or ordinary words and precise details:

> But Jane isn't shown with the sort of detail that enlivens. Cam thought that in writing a novel she would be free from the struggle with detail. But a novel should be one long struggle with detail, not of dates and facts but of difficult scenes, of character caught off guard. Words like "passionate" and "glamorous" are the opposite of detail. They become in a novel almost useless, the vocabulary of eulogy.

LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE AS MEMORY OF PRIOR TEXT. What are the sources and effects of using registers such as those described here? After noting some of the functions of simplified registers, Ferguson (1985) observes that "features of register ... may become conventionalized to the extent that they serve only as register markers without other communicative function." As he puts it, simplification may simply be "register-making." I will conclude by building on this notion of register for register's sake.

Speakers use a register they perceive as

appropriate to the context in order to sound right. Simultaneously, their choice of register is part of what creates the context. This view contributes to an aesthetics of discourse such as Becker (1984) described in this forum two years ago. The coherence of style (or, in the terms of Ervin-Tripp 1972, co-occurrence constraints) that characterizes a given register and links it to a given context simultaneously provides cultural coherence. Becker further proposes, "The actual a priori of any language event -- the real deep structure -- is an accumulation of remembered prior texts, acquired from particular sources. ... And our real language competence is access, via memory, to this accumulation of prior text" (p. 435). Thus, someone writing a letter to the editor wants the letter to sound like a letter to the editor. Consequently, when composing such a letter, s/he refers to letters to the editor s/he has read in print. The editors who decide whether to print this letter refer to their notions of what one should sound and look like. And if it is printed, this letter then serves as a model for those who will write future ones.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION. Folk formality is a discourse style which sits at the intersection of public and private discourse. An informal notion of formality, it is found in such discourse types as business letters written by private individuals who do not often write business letters, personal letters written by some (typically older) correspondents, letters to editors, newsletters and minutes of meetings produced by nonprofessional writers, Christmas letters, and many other contexts in which their non-work lives lead people to write in a genre they perceive as formal.

Preliminary findings indicate that folk notions of formality focus mainly on the lexical and intra-clause level. As Thompson (1984) found in letters to the editor and letters from a cousin, syntactic complexity in inter-clause relationships is not typically found. Markers of formality discussed above include lexical choice, nominalization, article deletion, definite article substitution, the impersonal "one" as pronoun, other forms of depersonalization, formal formulas, and quotation marks and capitalization. A related phenomenon I discussed briefly is folk eloquence: a register associated with less than effective creative writing.

Like Kazazis' Sunday Greek, folk formality is a discourse style decked out in its Sunday best. For many writers, like Thompson's Cousin Margaret, the results are duly impressive. Others may end up appearing like the unfortunate Dr. Aziz in E. M. Forster's A Passage to India, with a starched collar sticking awkwardly out (very likely for equally admirable reasons).

The notions of folk formality and folk eloquence suggest that formality is relative, not monolithic. Considering these dimensions in light of the theoretical perspectives of Ferguson and Becker suggests that understanding such registers can contribute to new insight into linguistic competence.

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The Development of the Indirect Passive in English

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This paper concerns the historical development in English of so-called "indirect passive" sentences such as 'He was given the book' wherein the indirect object (IO) of a corresponding active sentence also containing a direct object (DO) (e.g. 'Someone gave the book to him') becomes the grammatical subject of the related passive sentence. The traditional explanation for the appearance of such passives is: reanalysis under formal identity. That is, various non-accusative objects in Old English merged into the grammatical category of DO and therefore within the domain of the passive operation.

Of theoretical import are the claims of Lightfoot (1981), Lieber (1979) and Cole et al. (1980). Lightfoot's analysis is based on a theory of grammar in which (1) Nominative and Objective cases are assigned at surface structure, (2) Oblique case is base-assigned, and (3) the "movement of a $\bar{\bar{N}}$ to another $\bar{\bar{N}}$ position will take place only from a non-case-marked position (p.103). In conjunction with this theory he argues that the transformationally derived passive (Move $\bar{\bar{N}}$) has been present for all stages of English grammar and that base-assigned Oblique case was lost during the period of Middle English, making the indirect passive a 15th century innovation. Lieber argues that neither the IO nor DO is assigned Oblique in the base. Rather, the DO is assigned accusative at the surface level and the IO (in contrast to other Old English non-accusative objects) is not a lexically governed dative IO but a regular dative IO and receives its (dative) case assignment at surface structure as does the DO. Thus both the IO and DO of verbs like 'give' are converted to nominative subjects in corresponding personal passives. Lieber's analysis, then, predicts that direct and indirect passives existed in Old English. Both Lieber and Lightfoot assume, moreover, an isomorphic relationship between morphological and base-assigned cases and conceive of grammatical relations as discrete morpho-syntactic entities.

Others, however, have conceived of grammatical relations as sets of properties and have investigated diachronic change in terms of the redistribution of these properties across NPs.[1] The major work in this area is that of Cole et al. in which three stages are proposed for the acquisition of subject properties by a non-subject: (A) a period when a NP has none, (B) a subsequent period when the NP acquires subject behavior properties followed by (C) the period of acquiring subject coding properties. It is argued in Cole that stage C never precedes stage B. The data from early English do not fully support the Cole et al. hypothesis.

The view in this paper is that grammatical relations are not discrete morpho-syntactic entities but rather are constituted by the interaction and integration of semantic and discourse-pragmatic factors defined in terms of continua rather than roles.[2]