
Academic Register Versus Business Register

When I first re-encountered higher education a few years ago, it became clear to me that the requirements for academic writing were different to those I used in everyday written correspondence. I was introduced to the concept of "Register", and began to realise that I used more than one in my writing: a personal correspondence register, with loose grammar and emotional lexis; a personal internet register with even looser rules, a high level of abbreviation, and special punctuation (emoticons); and a business register at work, with formalised grammar and restricted lexis. It also became clear to me, as I looked at the work of colleagues, that many people use two different work registers. The first (B1) is similar to my own business register and is used for internal letters, memos, business emails and more ephemeral texts; the second (B2) is used for formal documents such as manuals, specifications and external letters. It was this second register that began to interest me: how did it come about, and what function do its users believe it serves?

My first investigations took me in the direction of the legal register. B2 is used in more formal communications, could there be an attempt to imbue the communication with legal authority? However, an investigation of the legal register showed that this was not the case. Many of the features of B2 are missing from the legal register, and many legal register features are missing from B2. The legal register uses long sentences and little punctuation other than the full stop; B2 uses extensive punctuation, and makes particular use of the semicolon and colon. Lists in legal register are usually embedded in sentences:

This document does not constitute an offer or a contract or the basis of a contract...

While those in B2 are listed with the colon/semi-colon construct. Another difference was lexis: among others, legal register uses "shall", B2 uses "will". But the most telling differences were grammatical: legal register tends to place subordinated constructs at the end of a sentence, B2 often places them at the beginning; and the use of passive constructs is much more common in B2 than in legal register.

Something else must be influencing the people who use B2. The circumstances of its use implies that people reserve it for important and prestigious occasions, although its actual use often creates an image of pomposity rather than prestige. It is almost as if the B2 users are applying a series of taught conventions, but applying them inappropriately because the teaching or the conventions are faulty. An informal investigation of the writing of work colleagues showed several strategies at work. Some (like me) used B1 almost exclusively, and appeared to consciously avoid B2; others used B2 in formal communication, but seemed able to work effectively within the register; others used B2 ineffectively, producing strange or misleading constructs. Some of these used B2 almost exclusively, which created many moments of hilarity for the office but little kudos for the poor user.

I decided to investigate the correspondence between B2 use and educational level. Of course, I was to be the judge of B2 usage, both whether it existed and whether a particular person used it. The judgements were subjective, but I attempted to make them more objective by setting out rules. The rules for B2 usage were:

- «» If the number of passive sentences exceeded the number of active, B2 was being used
- «» If more than 20% of all sentences started with a subordinate clause (like this one), B2 was being used

Only one of the two conditions needed to be met, although usually both or neither were achieved.

The rules for B2 misuse were:

- «» The document had to have met the rules for B2 usage above
- «» If a sentence in the text was constructed ungrammatically then B2 misuse has occurred. Examples of this are complex intervening phrases causing number conflicts (*the problems, for which a single solution has been created, is...*); and complex structure causing grammar problems (*the problem has, or will be dealt with...*)

I attempted to exclude accidental errors like spelling, and non-relevant errors like the grocer's apostrophe.

I then divided the work assessed into formal and informal texts based on the function. Internal memos, letters, emails and suchlike were counted as informal; manuals, specifications, letters and documents for outside consumption were counted as formal. My sample covered one office each for two different employers. Altogether

17 people were assessed, and a total of about 100 documents. The results are set out below:

	Didn't use B2	Used B2 without errors, formal only	Used B2 without errors, formal and informal	Used B2 with errors, formal only	Used B2 with errors, formal and informal
University	2	4	0	5	1
Non-University	3	1	0	0	1

The sample size is obviously too small to provide useful statistical values, but it did provide some pointers. The people who used B2 tended to know that it had a limited area of application, and used B1 for informal communication; and University attendees were more likely to use it than non-University attendees.

It was this last that set me thinking about academic register. I had previously been informed by the college I was attending that my essays did not achieve academic register, so I set out to find exactly what this register entailed. I had completed an English Language A level the previous year, and no mention of my writing style had been made, other than the fact it was very readable. I have also been praised at work for the clarity of my documentation, so I knew that academic register did not resemble the B1 style I used at work and for my A level essays.

By reading journals and academic texts I was able to formulate a set of rules for writing in an academic register, and I set them out below.

- «» Avoid the active tense. Most especially avoid personal attribution to the self.
- «» Build arguments from the bottom up. State your thesis at the end of the text as conclusions, do not place it at the front.
- «» Support arguments with sources if possible. Do not assume them as givens.
- «» Avoid levity and familiarity.
- «» Use only acceptable idioms. For instance, say "which means that" instead of "which goes to show", and "therefore" instead of "so".
- «» Provide evidential data in the main text, not appendices.
- «» Sentences do not need to be short. Academic texts tend to package multiple ideas into sentences, not single ideas.
- «» Use connectivity extensively – "this means that", "therefore", "however", etc.
- «» Do not use definites, use modals – e.g. "could indicate" instead of "indicates", "can be seen as showing" instead of "shows".

These features also seem to be common in the B2 register, which seems to indicate that the two are related. The fact that, in the sample, B2 is used more by University graduates than by non-graduates indicates that it is a register learned at University to meet an academic need, and then applied by the graduates when they go out to work.

Is this necessarily a bad thing? Academic register obviously lends kudos in the academic community, and it would seem likely that it would be prized in the business community. Unfortunately, this is not so. In business communication we are guided by the following set of rules:

- «» Avoid the passive tense. Attribution is important – own your decisions; give instructions not suggestions. (e.g. not "the program may be activated by..", but "activate the program by...").
- «» Place decisions first and arguments after. That way the arguments only need to be read if the decision looks odd.
- «» Avoid stuffiness and standoffishness.
- «» Avoid excessively complex language. Use short words and sentences if possible.
- «» Provide evidential data in appendices.
- «» Avoid excessive connectivity. If necessary bullet-point arguments.
- «» Use definites, try to avoid modals. Own your choices.

From this we can see that B2 is not just another business register, it is contextually a less prestigious register

than B1; and this is true for formal as well as informal texts. We have graduates entering the world of work with what they believe to be a high register, and applying it in their career. In fact, they have a register which is almost the opposite of what they actually require to make an impression. Yet there is no conversion course between academic register and business register (any more than there is between acceptable school register and academic register), so the graduates continue to use what they believe is a prestigious form. Business people tend to believe that the process of higher education equips a graduate for success, and therefore think that educational standards have slipped when the graduate appears unable to write even the simplest office memo to an acceptable standard. With luck, the graduate acquires B1 by a process of osmosis. Otherwise, the unfortunate graduate continues to believe they are doing good work, and produces constructs like the following from Microsoft's Outlook 2000 online help manual:

When you work offline, synchronize your folders and Address Book at a remote location with folders on a Microsoft Exchange Server computer, so you always have the latest information.

There is nothing grammatically wrong with this statement, but it contains a complex set of issues. The processes it is trying to describe are:

- «» The same data can be held on two machines;
- «» This data can be kept synchronised automatically;
- «» You can work offline with either set of data;
- «» When you go online the latest version of the data is copied to both machines.

The statement given above is therefore factually wrong: synchronisation does not occur when you are offline. However, the attempt to place all four ideas into a single construct has created the factual error.

Inappropriate application of B2 can even lead to bad construction, as the following from an Inland Revenue letter illustrates:

Please note for your records that in accordance with the above direction I direct that PAYE should be operated ...

The entire letter consists of three sentences, all of which begin "please note", including the semantically incorrect final sentence "please note to inform this office...". In the Inland Revenue (and most of the Civil Service) there is a tradition that letters are composed of standard paragraphs. As this letter concerns a usual occurrence (a missing N.I. number) we can assume that this piece of text is institutional and not personal.

In this paper I have not considered the advantages that use of academic register gives to academics. I'm sure that there are many, but they must be weighed against the disadvantages, both to students and to academia itself. Academics often complain that their work does not reach a wide audience, and then denigrate those who become widely-read as pop-scientists. It is true that the widely-read science books do appeal to popular culture, but it is a change of register, not content, that gives the appeal.

I make no apologies if this paper appears a somewhat vitriolic and personal diatribe against academic register. It came about because I recently received a memo from my Manager about a submission I had written: the arguments were sound, he said, but I should put the final paragraph at the top and put certain of the paragraphs into an appendix. Unusual that I should make those mistakes, was I perhaps feeling unwell?

Apparently, I have finally achieved academic register.

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