LINGUISTIC EVALUATION OF READERS’ DIGITAL FEEDBACK TO A HEALTH CRISIS: A REGISTER APPROACH

Dr. Carmen Piqué-Noguera
SIRVA Research Group
Universitat de València

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Term *register* coined by Reid (1956); further developed by Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens (1964).

Two angles:

- Varieties related to the **user**, i.e., dialects (Corder, 1973)
- Varieties related to their **use**, i.e., registers (Hudson, 1996).
Debate *genre vs. register*.

“the terms genre and register are the most confusing, and are often used interchangeably, mainly because they overlap to some degree”  
(Lee, 2001: 41)

“a particular genre may cut across a number of registers”  
(Trosborg, 1997: 10)
Debate genre vs. register.

Biber’s (1988) corpus-based multi-dimensional analysis focused on several genres.

“the concept of register implies a demonstration of the speaker’s individuality and intention through a process of choices made to adapt the information to the context of its situation”

(Giménez Moreno, 1997: 39)
Electronic communication

1. Newspaper reports → readers’ comments

2. Reader feedback to academic editorials → rapid responses (British Medical Journal)

**Rapid responses** allow “readers to respond to articles directly via the website as they are reading them. We don’t regard them as second class letters: they are just as eligible for inclusion in the paper journal as letters received in other forms.” (Delamothe & Smith, 2002: 1171)
The purpose is ...

To see how a recent global and widely-debated issue has been treated from different angles in search of register variation:

- Differences and similarities in register between academic editorials and newspaper reports.
- Register differences in readers’ feedback to either academic editorials or newspaper reports.
- Can roles be ascertained from their messages?
Compilation of texts dealing with the recent Ebola crisis internationally.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Origin/source</th>
<th>Readers’ feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 academic editorials</td>
<td>28 Rapid responses (RRs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Medical Journal (BMJ)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 newspaper reports</td>
<td>994 Readers’ Comments (RCs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Guardian (Guardian)</td>
<td>718 The Washington Post (WPost)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Results

**Linguistic features of editorials and reports and feedback from the readership**

**Voice & tense use in editorials and reports**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Academic Editorials &amp; Newspaper Reports</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage of use</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Active verb forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BMJ</strong></td>
<td>83.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Guardian &amp; WPost</strong></td>
<td>85.00</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

- Medical text
- Journalesse
Editorials and reports

Voice & tense use in RRs & RCs

Academic Editorials & Newspaper Reports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BMJ</th>
<th>Guardian &amp; WPost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active verb forms</td>
<td>83.81%</td>
<td>85.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive verb forms</td>
<td>16.19%</td>
<td>15.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple present active</td>
<td>86.26%</td>
<td>17.86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple past active</td>
<td>13.74%</td>
<td>82.14%</td>
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</table>

Rapid Responses & Readers' Comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BMJ</th>
<th>Guardian &amp; WPost</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active verb forms</td>
<td>78.27%</td>
<td>89.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive verb forms</td>
<td>21.73%</td>
<td>10.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple present active</td>
<td>77.19%</td>
<td>77.02%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple past active</td>
<td>22.81%</td>
<td>22.98%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Content features of academic editorials and respondents’ messages (RRs)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Ed 1</th>
<th>Ed 2</th>
<th>Ed 3</th>
<th>Ed 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. RRs</td>
<td>9 RRs</td>
<td>9 RRs</td>
<td>8 RRs</td>
<td>2 RRs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Ed 1 uses academic speech similar to Eds 2 and 3, although more narrative.
- Eds 2 and 3 more passives; written by three authors each; technical approach and more academically oriented.
- Eds 1 and 4 are single-authored: Ed 1 written by a journalist, factual and data oriented; and Ed 4 is a typical editorial, short sentences and lowest use of passives.
Content features of academic editorials and respondents’ messages (RRs)

RRs

- Some resemble a research note – rather long and documented.
- A few are short and rather colloquial.
- In general, polite register avoiding colloquialisms.

Eg. A harsh criticism against pharma laboratories

“Beware of ebola gate

The fiascos of flu-gate and climate-gate suggest that the brouhaha and boola-boola about Ebola may be payola for yet another venal vaccine scheme from Big Pharma's voracious, vexatious vaccinologists, whose scare-care may cause autoimmune disease via vaccinosis. To quote GB Shaw, ‘Science never solves one problem without creating ten more’.” (RR to 4th Ed, BMJ 18 Oct.)
Newspaper reports narrate specific events around Ebola and its incidence in Spain.

- Expository, with frequent quotes from other journalistic sources and expressions from people involved.
- Journalistic tone, typical voice and tense combination.

### Content features of newspaper reports and readers’ comments (RCs)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>The Guardian</th>
<th>The Washington Post</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. RCs</td>
<td>899</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
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**Newspaper reports** narrate specific events around Ebola and its incidence in Spain.
Readers’ comments use an informal register, rather colloquial, similar to a WhatsApp communication.

✓ Contractions: Guardian, n=473, 9.70%; WPost, n=157, 5.64%.

✓ Confusion of its (possessive) and it’s (subj+vb):
  “[…] run around screaming like a chicken with it’s head cut off.” (RC to WPost).

✓ Ellipsis and subjectless sentences:
  “Seems senseless to…” (RC to Guardian)

✓ Terms not belonging to academic or journalistic texts:
  “his own fucking complaint”, “sure as hell” (RCs to Guardian)

✓ Poor English or expressions mixing Spanish and English:
  “I’m agree.” (RC to Guardian 8 Oct. 3:00 pm)
  “Qué chapuza!” (RC to Guardian 7 Oct. 11:25 am)
Irony: “I don't know exactly how this nurse in Spain contracted the deadly Ebola virus, but Obama must have had a lot to do with it. The wack-right tells me so” (WPost 8 Oct.)

Criticism: “If anyone in the UK is sick of Cameron, just try Rajoy for gross incompetence at every level” (Guardian 7 Oct.)
Comments from several participants

RC-2: This virus will mutate and it can be transmitted airborne.
RC-2: Believe what you want. Your opinion is also speculation.
RC-2: Believe what makes you sleep easiest. It will mutate and it will be transmitted airborne. You're just believing what you're told.
RC-3: Are you a virology professor? Actually the man who discovered it just said that it is already mutating. I assume you know what you're talking about.

Main character, most likely a knowledgeable person

RC-1: [...] It is not airborne. [...] Its possible mutation is pure speculation.
RC-1: This would be a first. There is no evidence to suggest it will happen.

[This last remark and/or accusation is upsetting and inappropriate.]

[His/her qualifications & reading ability have been challenged.]
RC-4: It is an airborne disease, it is a VIRUS; cold, flu, etc. airborne... A horror story about to become reality.

RC-5: Tell you what, lets try an experiment. You sit in a room when an Ebola patient coughs and sneezes and we'll see what happens.

RC-1: Wow. Ignorance is bliss. Sometimes though it’s downright embarrassing. IT IS NOT AIRBORNE.

RC-1: [...] Please explain in a non-Hollywood way, how this may happen. Until then I’m happy. Sorry to disappoint your fantasy.

[Long pause, retaliates with a long scientific exposition about mutation & transmission. Ends saying:]

RC-1: [...] Please explain in a non-Hollywood way, how this may happen. Until then I’m happy. Sorry to disappoint your fantasy.

[Obviously, there is no answer to this request.]

RC-1: Birds can fly, a penguin’s a bird, a penguin can fly.

RC-1: Futile waste of time as no one would catch it. It’s not airborne. Disagree with the science all you want. It
Conclusions

This investigation attempted to pinpoint characteristics / defining components to delimit register:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Editorials’ RRs</th>
<th>Newspaper reports’ RCs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondents typically address editorials (over time = weeks).</td>
<td>Respondents typically address each other (immediacy = min.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preoccupation over the crisis; agreeing or disagreeing with editorialists’ opinions.</td>
<td>Opinions affected by the respondents’ mood (criticism, anger, boredom, wit, sarcasm).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional / academic register (retired physicians, scientists, or professionals holding a position in a health institution).</td>
<td>Colloquial register: ain’t, gonna, wow, yep, gotcha; familiar. Often insults against interlocutors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants are identified.</td>
<td>Interlocutors are anonymous.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
THANK YOU!

Carmen.Pique@uv.es

https://carmenpiquenoguera.wordpress.com/

SIRVA Research Group
References


