

LANGUAGE AND SPEECH LEVELS

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Introduction

Language is not just a system of grammar and vocabulary, but a versatile tool that adapts to social contexts. A key element in effective communication is the ability to shift between different speech levels—ways of speaking that match the formality, setting, and social relationship between speakers. Understanding these levels is crucial not only in sociolinguistics but also in language education and intercultural communication.

Types of Speech Levels

Linguists have classified speech into several main levels. These are often placed on a scale from the most formal to the most informal:

- **Frozen (Static):**

Language that is fixed and unchanging. Found in constitutions, prayers, pledges, and classic literature. Example: 'I pledge allegiance to the flag...'

- **Formal:**

Used in one-way communication with no expectation of feedback. Common in speeches, academic writing, or ceremonies. Example: 'It is an honor to address you today on this occasion.'

- **Consultative:**

Two-way communication where the speaker does not assume prior knowledge. Used in professional or educational interactions. Example: 'Let me explain the process step by step.'

- **Casual:**

Used between friends or peers. Includes slang, idioms, and contractions. Example: 'Wanna hang out later?'

- **Intimate:**

Reserved for close relationships. May include inside jokes, nicknames, or incomplete speech understood by context. Example: 'You okay, babe?'

Additional Speech Level Influences**1. Sociocultural Factors**

In many languages (e.g., Korean, Japanese, Uzbek), speech levels are strictly governed by age, gender, social hierarchy, and familiarity. For instance, Korean includes honorific speech forms that change verbs and expressions based on the listener's status.

2. Code-Switching

Multilingual speakers often switch between speech levels and languages depending on the context. This practice, called code-switching, reflects identity, solidarity, or formality.

3. Digital Communication

In modern digital platforms (e.g., Twitter, Telegram, email), speech levels adapt in

unique ways. For example:

- Formal: in emails or professional group chats.
- Casual: in memes, status updates, or informal messages.
- Intimate: in private voice messages or emoji-laden chats.

Theoretical Perspectives

Several linguistic theories explore speech levels:

- Register Theory (Halliday): Describes how variations in field (topic), tenor (relationship), and mode (medium) influence language use.
- Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson): Explains how people use language to maintain face (self-image) and navigate power relationships.
- Speech Accommodation Theory (Giles): Focuses on how people adjust their speech to either converge (become similar) or diverge (emphasize difference) from others.

Why Speech Levels Matter

1. Social Awareness

Recognizing and applying appropriate speech levels avoids misunderstandings and shows cultural and interpersonal sensitivity.

2. Language Proficiency

In language teaching, mastering various speech levels helps learners function in diverse environments—academic, professional, and social.

3. Cultural Identity

Speech levels often carry markers of regional or social identity. For example, youth slang can signal group belonging.

Conclusion

Speech levels are essential in navigating social interactions across contexts and cultures. Mastery of these levels reflects linguistic intelligence, cultural awareness, and emotional intelligence. In a globalized world where people interact across boundaries, understanding how to shift registers appropriately is not just useful—it's necessary.

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