Discourse Shifting for Humorous Effect: The Python Method

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The linguistic concept of register, while not yet defined to the satisfaction of all, is nevertheless a fairly well used one in describing speakers' shifts in language according to situational norms or constraints. Inappropriateness of register for context is usually seen as a sociolinguistic or pragmatic error. But in some cases it is done intentionally and creatively, such as in several cases of register-shifting humor in the TV series *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. This paper gives several examples of humorous register shifting in Monty Python, and analyzes how the shifting has its effect.

Keywords : register, Monty Python, humor, jokes, linguistics

Introduction

The speech registers we use in daily life are usually familiar ones. We can alter our speaking between discussions with friends or bosses without making a great conscious effort. However, not knowing the appropriate speech register for a given situation can be a problem, especially if you end up using the wrong one. The improper use of register in a situation can be embarrassing, but it can also be humorous. The humor employed by the comedy troupe Monty Python often uses speech register incongruities to create humor. In this paper I will first describe the concept of "register." Then I will summarize and analyze mixed-register humor found in the original Monty Python television series *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (hereafter MPFC; see *Complete*, 1989). By examining this humor I hope to show the ways in which registers are (mis)placed in Monty Python humor, to show how they contribute to Monty Python's style of humor, and to demonstrate how in some instances more serious messages about human interaction may lie behind these jokes.

Register

Register is a very nebulous term that can be used very specifically (e.g. for "occupational speech" only), or very broadly (see Platt & Platt, 1975, p. 55). Some sociolinguists use the term *register* in much the same way that others use the term *functional variety*. This describes the use of "speech varieties" in "certain domains" (Platt & Platt, 1975, p. 54). Still others add to this a "style" element, which refers to so-called "vertical" variety, i.e. from casual to formal (Platt & Platt, 1975, p. 54). (*Style*, however, can also refer to more individual, idiosyncratic variations in language use.) Two definitions, one by Leech and Short (1981) and the other by Attardo (2001), are careful to include both functional varieties and vertical varieties:

REGISTER is the term commonly used for language variation of a non-dialectal type; eg differences between polite and familiar language; spoken and written language; scientific, religious, legal language, etc. (Leech & Short, 1981, p. 80)

...we can think of register as a set of links between linguistic features (particularly, lexical items and collocations, i.e., the likelihood that two items may co-occur) and connotations (of various kinds, but primarily of the formal/informal kind).

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(Attardo, 2001, p. 104)

Lee (2001) goes into great depth to analyze how terms such as *style*, *register*, and *genre* are used by linguists and literary critics to describe variation in language. His suggested distinction among these terms follows more of an individual-to-community trajectory than a vertical or horizontal one. *Style* "is essentially to do with an individual's use of language" (p. 45) apart from other factors such as context or purpose. Each person individually speaks in a different style, and each individual occasionally changes their style as they see fit. *Register* and *genre* have more to do with the social context of the language, and Lee (2001) believes that both terms are describing essentially the same thing from two different viewpoints:

> *Register* is used when we view a text as language: as the instantiation of a conventionalised, functional configuration of language tied to certain broad societal situations, that is, variety according to use.... *Genre* is used when we view the text as a member of a category: a culturally recognised artifact, a grouping of texts according to some conventionally recognised criteria, a grouping according to purposive goals, culturally defined. (p. 46)

Register would seem, according to Lee, to be the term to describe an unlimited variety of uses of language, dependent on situation, audience, and speaker's individual style, while *genre* seems to be concerned with the limited, but ever changing, set of contexts that society has established where certain kinds of language use are predominant. Considering the context of MPFC, where established societal norms are being purposely mocked or ignored, Lee's open-ended sense of *register* seems appropriate.

There seems to be a two-dimensional axis on which register shift works: vertical and lateral. Generally speaking, a vertical shift in register marks an increase or decrease in formality, politeness, and monitoring of speech. Formality and monitoring are manifest not only in change in pronunciation of the speaker (e.g. pronouncing the final "n/ng" in *doing*), but in change in lexicon ("television/TV/tube").

A lateral shift moves into other "spheres" of speech communities, where the formality of speech may or may not differ but the context definitely will, requiring changes in lexicon, subject matter, pronunciation, and other factors. For example, a construction worker involved in an on-the-job accident might be asked by several people to relate the story of what happened to him. First of all, to his coworkers gathered around him, he might tell his story in a very low register, glossing over elements he believes are already familiar to them. He is among people who share his knowledge and experiences. To the emergency medical technician treating him at the scene he might tell his story in a still informal, yet different style, in which he removes some of the colloquialisms common to his style, and adds explanations that might have been ellipsed when talking to his coworkers. The EMT in turn might converse with the construction worker about the details of the accident, using terms the victim doesn't commonly use, like "hemorrhage" or "compound fracture" rather than "bleed" or "break". They would be discussing the same thing, but in different registers. Later, to the judge at his insurance claim hearing, the victim may tell his story using a very formal register, marked by involved explanations. This context, which combines the demands for linguistic accuracy and veracity with the acknowledgment of social distance among the parties involved, requires a very unique style of speaking.

Register does not work like a compass; there is no "center" register, and none of the shifts is absolute in directionality. Nor are these registers discrete divisions of language or dialect. However, higher registers of a language seem to converge on one spot—which in the case of English might be called a Standard Formal English—while lower registers may spread out ever wider and wider into various informal speech communities.

Individuals speaking in their native language are generally expected to be knowledgeable of proper situational registers, and to function within those registers at the appropriate time. There are times and places for "legalese" (Obler & Menn, 1982, p. 82), for "lecture" language (Platt & Platt, 1975, p. 56), perhaps even for "traffic-warden's English" (or perhaps not—see Crystal, 1981, p. 152). Our first impressions of others can be highly influenced by

both what they say to us and how they say it. Someone who cannot produce the appropriate register for a given situation may be shunned by the group working "properly" within that register. (I can remember, for example, the story of a television weather announcer in Hawaii who was passed over for jobs on the mainland because his English came out as too friendly and "local"—in terms of both register and dialect.)

Register Shift and Humor

Mismatches in context and register happen in real life and can have definite negative effects. But at other times the intentional imposition of one register on an inappropriate situation can have different, often humorous, effects. One reason that both Leech and Short (1981) and Attardo (2001) address register shift in their discussions of literature is to analyze the intentional shift in register that authors sometimes employ to achieve artistic aims. Leech and Short (1981) say that "[s]hifts of register [in literature] work with other indications of point of view to give a multidimensional sense of situation" (p. 110). In other words, authors will shift register in order to allow readers to see the content from a different point of view that may lie outside that of the characters, the narrator, or perhaps even the author. Farb (1973), although not discussing literature in particular, says that "style [defined by Farb very similarly to register] has its own life apart from the content of what is being talked about" (p. 127), and its thoughtful manipulation allows for more to be said than what is contained in the content alone. Specifically, "disparities of register and tone" can be markers of irony (Leech & Short, 1981, p. 106).

And they can be used to create jokes and humor. A common sarcastic phrase has been used in the US since at least the 1990s. Imagine two people who are familiar with each other in dialogue, and A makes a request of B that B sees as belittling or demeaning. B responds with the phrase: "Would you like fries with that?" The context from which the phrase is derived—the fast food industry—may have little or no relevance to the conversation between the two respondents, but B uses the phrase, out of context and out of register, to imply that A's request is not appropriate for two people on an equal social footing, and is more akin to a demand that a customer would make of a clerk at a hamburger restaurant. B's intention is sarcasm, but also humor.

Another example of humor emerging from misplaced register is found in Blake (2007). This is a joke that may or may not be based on an actual verbal exchange between two sports announcers while discussing a certain football player:

A: He's certainly very good. Where does he come from?

B: He's domiciled in Newcastle.

A: Yeah, but where does he live? (p. 10)

This is a case perhaps inverted from the "fries" joke above, in that speaker B's response is in a register far above what is expected in the dialogue. The listener can be put off guard, or surprised, by the speaker "selecting a lexeme or phraseological unit from a different style level than the context would predict" (Alexander, 1984, p. 60; cited in Attardo, 2001, p. 104), but when it is done intentionally and skillfully by the speaker, it can be humorous. Attardo (1994) explains why, in terms of "scripts", or contextual expectations which are being set up by the dialogue as it progresses:

Suppose that a friend's huge Doberman is growling at me. By saying "Could you call back your doggie?" I activate explicitly the script for DOG but also the connotative script CHILD [by using the child-language word "doggie"]. The situation itself will activate a number of connotative scripts such as DANGER, DISMEMBERMENT, etc., which are all locally incompatible with CHILD and this will account for the (slight) humor of my remark. (p. 252-253)

According to Attardo (1994), "these cases of 'register' humor are mostly created by authorial [or speaker] intrusions and/or comments, since they involve an evaluation and a skillfully controlled contrast between the expected style and the stylistic choice made in the text" (p. 265).

In Monty Python humor as well, register shifting is often used to create ambiguity and humor. Below I will summarize and analyze some examples of register shifting in MPFC, dividing them into categories of "shift up," "shift down," "lateral shift,"

and "multiple shift."

Shift Up

The "Light Entertainment Awards" sketch (*Complete*, 1989, II:229*ff;* hereafter MPFC references will be by volume and page number only) makes fun of the inflated, fawning language of television announcers during awards programs by producing language that is inflated beyond understanding. It is a "shift" in register from high formal to "over the top".

In the sketch the host of the program, Dickie Attenborough, gets so caught up in clause subordinations, polite circumlocutions, and multiple negatives, that his sentences are often left incomplete: "There can be no finer honour than to welcome into our midst tonight a guest who has not only done only more than not anyone for our society, but nonetheless has only done more" (II:229). Another longer example is equally unfathomable:

> Ladies and gentlemen, seldom can it have been a greater pleasure and privilege than it is for me now to announce that the next award gave me the great pleasure and privilege of asking a man without whose ceaseless energy and tireless skill the British Film Industry would be today. (II:231)

The endless coordinations and bottomless subordinations in Dickie Attenborough's overly polite register not only make fun of the fawning speech at awards shows in general but may be singling out particular British celebrities as well (Sir Richard Attenborough?).

Another shifted-up-register sketch, "Tax on Thingy" (I:196-97), shows a few government executives in a room, one of them speaking what sounds at first like gibberish, but which turns out to be political jargon, including a series of abbreviations or acronyms:

> Gentlemen, our MP saw the PM this AM and the PM wants more LSD from the PIB by tomorrow AM or PM at the latest.... Now—the fiscal deficit with regard to the monetary balance, the current financial year excluding invisible exports, but adjusted of course for seasonal variations and the

incremental statistics of the fiscal and revenue arrangements for the forthcoming annual budgetary period terminating in April. (I:196)

After he has finished, and the camera has panned across at the confused looks on the others' faces, one of the officials sits up and ventures a guess: "I think he's talking about taxation." Jargon is a form of language specialization closely connected with register, although the term *jargon* often implies a use of language that purposely excludes non-members of a particular occupational/academic group. Whether malicious or not, jargon is a definite indicator of "occupational speech." What makes this sketch funny is that the politician's speech is so specialized that other members of his own occupation don't know what he's talking about. A politician giving a press conference using this register of speech would naturally confuse his audience a great deal. While this example, from our outsiders' viewpoint, seems like more of a lateral register shift than a vertical one, within the sketch itself the impression is given that the one politician's jargon, while appropriate to the situation, is so heavily employed that it confuses his own colleagues.

The preceding two examples were primarily lexical ones, involving choice of words, but examples of phonological shifting up also occur in numerous sketches, in which people say certain words and humor is made from their pronunciation. In the "Flying Lessons" sketch (I:205-08), one man says the word "aeroplane" in three syllables, and he is mocked by a second man this way:

> Oh, 'an aeroplane'. Oh, I say, we are grand, aren't we? (*imitation posh accent*) 'Oh, oh, no more buttered scones for me, mater. I'm off to play the grahnd piahno'. 'Pardon me while I fly my aeroplane'. (I:207)

The second man makes fun of the first man's "posh" pronunciation. While "posh" talk may have connections with dialect, it most often refers to ways of speaking that people can change at will depending on the social situation. The term *posh* itself is a bit pejorative in describing those who might be trying to impress others by speaking

"above" themselves. The second man's reaction is supported by a few studies of "attitudes of sociolectal variation" cited in Platt & Platt (1975; a study of attitudes toward Australian "cultivated," "general," and "broad" language is included there). Typical attitudes toward "upper sociolects" (higher registers) are revealed in words like "put on, snobbish," etc., while "lower sociolects" (registers) are described as "coarse, ugly, harsh" (p. 52). This description of lower sociolects leads us to the next section.

Shift Down

Sketches demonstrating downward shifts in register, like "Apology (Politicians)" and "Chemist Sketch", purposely use vulgar and insulting words in the wrong context to create humor. The "Apology" (II:128-29) is set up as an editorial comment from the BBC, with an invisible announcer reading as the text scrolls up the screen. It is meant to be an apology for unfavorable portrayals of politicians on the MPFC program (see "Tax on Thingy" above) but, in the midst of the "apology", the announcer describes politicians in increasingly insulting ways, from "weak-kneed, political time-servers" to "crabby ulcerous little self-seeking vermin" and "squabbling little toadies", while at the same time stating that it is not the program's intention to portray politicians in this way. The statement ends with "We are sorry if this impression has come across" (I:129). The incremental drop in register from polite, TV announcer language to vicious name-calling heightens the irony of the "apology."

The "Chemist Sketch" (I:231) starts in a chemist's shop (pharmacy) and has the chemist walking out with a handful of prescriptions to distribute to customers. Rather than call out patients' names, he identifies them by asking vulgar questions referring to their ailments: "Who's got the pox?" and "Who's got wind?" The base tone of his questions is matched by the indifferent way that he tosses prescriptions across the room to their recipients. In another supposed "intervention" by the BBC management, the sketch is halted and a caption appears that reads: "The Chemist Sketch— An Apology." A voice-over says, "The BBC would like to apologize for the poor quality of the writing in that sketch. It is not BBC policy to get easy laughs

with words like *bum, knickers, botty* or *wee-wees*" (I:231). But the announcer himself starts laughing and has to stop talking. Another BBC announcer then steps on camera and authoritatively says, "These are the words that are not to be used again on this programme." As he says this he clicks a remote control in his hand and the forbidden words—in some cases with certain letters blanked out to "soften" them—are projected one at a time on a screen behind him, ironically drawing more attention to them and their inappropriateness.

These two sketches take normally formal or polite situations and insert degrading and offensive language. It is interesting that both of these sketches also include "apologies" from the BBC, the service responsible for their broadcast. There seems to be something morally improper about functioning in a register that is low for the situation (warranting an "apology" to the entire TV viewing audience), while the worst that can happen if you function in a higher register than expected is that someone may think you are stuck up (see above). Lower registers are described as "harsh," as shown above, and harshness and surprise are the devices that sketches like "Apology" and "Chemist Sketch" use to generate their humor.

Lateral Shift

The "Icelandic Saga" sketch (II:47-50) is a somewhat complicated sketch that uses register and topic shift to link two seemingly unrelated contexts. The language of the sketch shifts from one register, typical of one situation, into another register, typical of the other, and the actual content of the sketch ultimately shifts along with the language and register. It begins as what appears to be a made-for-TV historical drama. The hero of the drama, Erik Njorl, is a Scandinavian warrior from the 12th century. As he mounts his horse and rides off in search of new lands to explore, a narrator builds excitement with narrative such as the following:

> Twelve days and nights he rode. Through rain and storm. Through wind and snow beyond the enchanted waterfall, through the elfin glades until he reached his goal. (II:49)

Earlier in the sketch it was hinted that the

production was having research and budget difficulties, and a group called the North Malden Icelandic Saga Society had offered to underwrite the production in return for certain commercial privileges. But as the saga progresses we begin to see the extent of the underwriters' aims. The production shifts from being historical entertainment to being an ad promoting business investment opportunities. When Erik Njorl "reaches his goal," it turns out to be the high street of a modern and un-Icelandic city called North Malden, somewhere in the UK. He and his horse look around in confusion at the lit-up storefronts and the automobiles racing by. While the scenery has changed dramatically, the narrative takes longer to shift from "saga" register to "commercial enterprise promotion" register:

> He had found the rich and pleasant land beyond the mountains, the land where golden streams sang their way through fresh green meadows. Where there were halls and palaces, an excellent swimming pool and one of the most attractive bonus incentive schemes for industrial development in the city. Only fifteen miles from excellent Thames-side docking facilities and within easy reach of the proposed M25. Here it was that Erik Njorl, son of Frothgar, met the mayor Mr. Arthur Huddinut, a local solicitor. (II:49)

Within two sentences the narration moves from "fresh green meadows" to "attractive bonus incentive schemes". The "saga" register hangs on for as long as it can, retaining the epic-poetical phrase "son of Frothgar" one more time, before giving in entirely to jingly commercial language. Soon after this the program is "halted" (yet again by TV executives) and a compromise is reached to return the program to at least some of its original dramatic intent. Even to the end, though, the narrator's discourse contains subtle register incongruities: "With moist eyes, Erik leaves this happy land to return to the harsh uneconomic realities of life in the land of Ljosa waters" (II:49).

Other sketches are far less subtle in their jarring juxtaposition of topic and register. In the "Semaphore Version of *Wuthering Heights*" sketch

(I:198-99), actors portraying the two main characters of *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine and Heathcliff, express their love to each other from two hills a hundred yards apart, using signal flags. Variations on these "alternative modes of presenting literature" include *Julius Caesar* performed with Aldis lamps, which are flashing lights used for clicking Morse Code (I:200); and *A Tale of Two Cities* performed in the squawks and imitated language sounds of parrots (I:270-71). In the latter, actors in Georgian-era costumes stand around saying "Hello, hello," and "Who's a pretty boy, then." Each of these retellings is an example of a severe shift in discourse community. The word-mimicking noises of trained parrots probably should not be considered a "register" of language. But it is still an interesting application of one kind of "speech" onto another speech community.

Multiple Shifts

The examples I've given above typically employ a major shift in register that creates a mismatch between language and context. The humor is in characters and audience reacting to that mismatch. Other sketches make not one but several shifts in register as they progress. They may either shift back and forth between two registers (which, arguably, the "Icelandic Saga" sketch described above does), or they may continuously shift into new, unrelated registers.

A clear back-and-forth shift occurs in the "Rude and Polite" sketch (I:243-44). Here a man walks into a butcher shop and politely asks to buy a chicken. The butcher greets him with an insult: "Don't come in here with your posh talk you nasty, stuck-up twit." When the man says, "I beg your pardon?" the butcher rapidly switches register and politely replies, "A chicken, sir. Certainly, sir." From then on each response by the butcher alternates between politeness and rudeness. After several confusing exchanges the customer finally brings up the butcher's behavior, "I can't help noticing that you insult me and then you're polite to me alternately." The butcher emotionally replies, "I'm terribly sorry to hear that, sir." "That's all right. It doesn't really matter." "Tough titty if it did, you nasty spotted prancer!" (I:244). While the customer never adjusts completely to the butcher's shifts in register, the

audience likely understand the pattern, and wait in anticipation of whatever rude comment the butcher is going to say next.

In the "Tuesday Documentary/Children's Story/Party Political Broadcast" sketch (II:126-28), the presenters keep shifting register and topic to address different audiences, sometimes in mid-sentence. The first presenter, discussing the day's activities in Parliament, begins to shift his discourse, and his topic, like this:

> The Minister for not listening to people toured Batley today to investigate allegations of victimization in home-loan improvement grants.... Parliament rose at 11:30, and, crawling along a dark passageway into the old rectory, broke down the door to the serving hatch, painted the spare room and next weekend I think they'll be able to make a start on the boy's bedroom, while Amy and Roger, up in London for a few days, go to see the mysterious Mr. Grenville. (II:126-27)

This is a complicated series of digressions. It begins as a discussion (albeit a silly one) of political activities in Parliament for the day, but in the middle of one sentence, the topic and register shift from political news to a kind of mystery storytelling, then to a sort of neighborly chat on home improvement, then back to mystery storytelling. As the presenter is talking, a caption appears at the bottom of the screen, explaining that "'Today in Parliament' has now become the classic serial." The presenter goes on:

> Sybil feels once again a resurgence of her old affection and she and Balreau return to her little house in Clermont-Ferrand, the kind of two-up, two-down house that most French workers throughout the European Community are living in today. (II:127)

The register and tone shift again, as the description of a house that seems to be part of dramatic development begins adding details more appropriate to a socioeconomics discussion. Another caption states: "The classic serial has now become the Tuesday documentary." Another presenter continues, seemingly on the same topic that the first

presenter had just finished with:

> The walls of these houses are lined with prestressed asbestos which keeps the house warm and snuggly and ever so safe from the big bad rabbit, who can scratch and scratch for all he's worth, but he just can't get into Porky's house. (II:127)

At first the register fits that of a documentary, as carried on from the first presenter, but when the second presenter reaches the word "warm", he begins describing the topic in terms of a fairy tale. As he does so another caption reads: "The Tuesday documentary has become 'Children's Story.'" The presenter goes on: "Where is Porky? Here he is. What a funny little chap. But Porky's one of the lucky ones—he survived the urban upheaval of the thirties and forties." And another caption is put up: "The children's story has gone back into the Tuesday documentary", but it must be hurriedly replaced by one reading "No it hasn't" when the presenter starts talking about affluence and "shiny cars that go brrm, brrm, brrm" (II:128).

In this example as in some previous ones, topic seems to shift along with register, but part of the intended humor is in using certain words and phrases—such as "warm" and "the kind of two-up, two-down house"—in ways that straddle the different discourse communities involved. These shifts move up and down on the register scale as well as from side to side, but they are all jarringly incongruous to content, except for those moments when register, topic, and captions are all briefly on the same page.

A similar chasing game occurs in a sketch parodying American TV commercials (II:3-4). First an ad for American military defense describes American "protection" in terms of dental care ("...communism works by eroding away from the inside..."), then a toothpaste ad illustrates its product's benefits in terms of two cars in a drag race ("...Crelm toothpaste goes on to win with 100% protection..."), and finally a gasoline ad claims that "engine deposits are pushed off the face of the earth by the superior forces" of its petrol additive (II:4). Each commercial uses a register and analogy more appropriate to one of the other commercials. It is

common for advertisements to utilize linguistic register strategically in "making direct associations between the product and the target audience" (Fuertes-Olivera, et al., 2001, p. 1295), and some commercials may be guilty of trying too hard to evoke one aspect of society while its product is clearly part of another—for example, an automobile commercial that incorporates images and language associated with nature and the wilderness, where there are no cars. This MPFC sketch seems to show advertisers going to extremes in trying to capture audiences outside the scope of their products. Ironically, putting aside the purposely comical cartoon presentations accompanying these commercials, if a viewer were to watch only one of these three MPFC commercials without seeing the other two, they may not think the juxtaposition is so farfetched, and may miss the intended humor.

Conclusion

These examples show that, while awareness of appropriate register is important to function in society, knowledgeable and purposeful misuse of register is often used to create humor. Even accidentally using an inappropriate register can be funny. Swearing out loud in a chapel is not a socially acceptable practice, but when somebody does it, at least some people involved are sure to think it is funny. Those who are rigid in their defense of "appropriate language" in certain, usually formal, situations are maintaining strong barriers, perhaps to protect perceived power structures. The MPFC series—and countless other humorists in history— seem to be showing in this type of register-based humor that these social walls we build with language are not nearly as protective as we think they are. The amount of humor within a culture, including humor that brings down the high or elevates the low as some of these examples have shown, is a measurement of the freedom of that culture (see Hewison, 1981, 95). This is a possible explanation for the spate of Soviet jokes that began to come out of the Soviet Union during the Gorbachev administration in the 1980s (Raskin, 1985). Other instances of register humor in MPFC,

such as the TV commercials, are perhaps intended to reveal (through mockery) how popular media sometimes try to manipulate the public by intentionally shifting discourse in ways that we are not aware of or have become insensitive to. Shifts in register for humorous purposes are not only linguistic demonstrations of social awareness, but may be important statements of social freedom.

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