



Formal and Informal Language Use among University Students: A Sociolinguistic Analysis

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Abstract. This article explores the distinctions between formal and informal language, focusing on their unique features, intended purposes, and appropriate usage contexts. Informal language tends to be more relaxed, spontaneous, and commonly used in casual conversations. In contrast, formal language is structured, respectful, and predominantly employed in academic, professional, and official environments. The study emphasizes how choosing the right language style impacts communication by affecting clarity, tone, and overall effectiveness. The differences between vocabulary choices, grammatical structures, and communicative intentions are examined to show how language style influences interaction. Understanding when to use formal or informal language enables speakers and writers to adapt more easily to various social situations. This adaptability not only improves communication but also helps in fostering better understanding across different contexts, ensuring that the message is received in the intended manner. By mastering the appropriate use of both language styles, individuals can enhance their communication skills and navigate diverse social settings more effectively.

Keywords: Clarity; Communication; Contexts; Formal Language; Informal Language

1. INTRODUCTION

Language style plays a crucial role in shaping communication effectiveness across social and academic contexts. As digital communication grows and interactional norms evolve, the distinction between formal and informal language becomes increasingly relevant (Crystal, 2011). Formal language, marked by precision and structure, is often required in professional and academic settings (Hyland, 2004). In contrast, informal language promotes interpersonal closeness and spontaneity, commonly used in daily conversations and on digital platforms (Yule, 2016). According to Holmes (2013), linguistic choices are never arbitrary but are influenced by social factors such as the relationship between participants and the setting of the interaction.

This research investigates university students' awareness and use of formal versus informal language in various communicative situations. The study aims to analyze students' linguistic choices, their ability to switch registers, and the implications these choices have on communication success.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Formal and informal language have been widely conceptualized in sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, and discourse studies as contextually driven variations shaped by social relationships, communicative goals, and medium-specific constraints (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). Foundational work by Halliday situates formality within the theory of register, proposing that linguistic choices reflect configurations of field, tenor, and mode, thus framing formality as a socially patterned semiotic response rather than a fixed stylistic category (Halliday & Hasan, 1989).

Complementing this theoretical stance, Biber's multidimensional corpus-based model demonstrates that distinctions between formal and informal language operate along multiple linguistic dimensions such as involvement versus informational density which revealing that features associated with formality (e.g., complex syntax, nominalizations, passive constructions) co-occur systematically in particular registers, especially academic and bureaucratic writing (Biber et al., 1998). Informal language, by contrast, is marked by interactional features such as contractions, first- and second-person pronouns, colloquialisms, and discourse markers that facilitate interpersonal alignment (Yule, 2016).

Bell's (1984) audience design theory further explains that these linguistic variations emerge from speakers' sensitivity to audience expectations, suggesting that formality is dynamically negotiated rather than statically assigned. Politeness theory, particularly as elaborated by Brown and Levinson (1987), adds a sociocultural dimension by linking formal linguistic choices to facework, power asymmetry, and mitigation of face-threatening acts. Contemporary research extends these insights into digital communication environments, with Crystal (2003) and subsequent scholars documenting how the affordances of online platforms foster hybrid registers that blend formal informational structures with informal interpersonal cues, challenging traditional dichotomies.

Empirical studies in educational, professional, and cross-cultural contexts further reveal that speakers and writers strategically navigate the formality continuum based on disciplinary norms, institutional expectations, and cultural conventions (Hyland, 2004; Zhang & Wang, 2020). As noted by Chaer & Agustina (2010), the choice of variety is also heavily influenced by the social function of the language in a given community. Taken together, the literature positions formal and informal language not as rigidly opposed categories but as fluid, multifunctional registers shaped by social structure, technological mediation, and pragmatic demands, underscoring the importance of register awareness for effective communication in diverse contexts (Meyerhoff, 2019).

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a quantitative descriptive survey method. Data were collected from 14 university students through an online questionnaire assessing:

- Language preference (formal/informal)
- Code-switching behavior
- Language use on social media
- Awareness of stylistic appropriateness in academic contexts

Responses were measured using a Likert scale (1–5). Results were analyzed descriptively and supported by visual representations (charts) of students' responses.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Based on data from 14 respondents, 71.4% of students use formal language as their first language, while 28.6% use informal language more frequently. This reflects the foundational understanding that students distinguish between "standard" and "non-standard" varieties based on their primary socialization (Chaer & Agustina, 2010)

Code-Switching

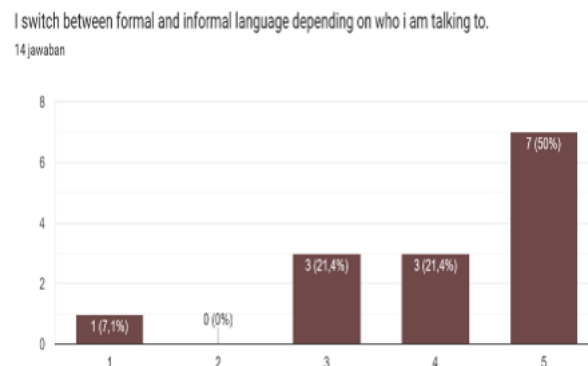


Figure 1. Code-Switching Results

In addition to preferences for formal or informal language, the data also shows that most students change the type of language they use depending on the person they're speaking to. Fifty percent of respondents chose 5 (strongly agree), meaning they actively switch between formal and informal language according to the social context. This aligns with the theory of variationist sociolinguistics, where speakers adapt their speech to the perceived norms of the situation (Tagliamonte, 2012).

Use of Informal Language on Social Media

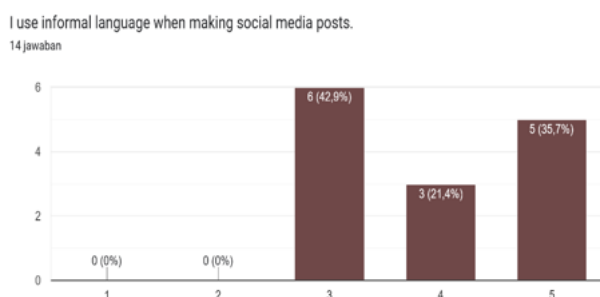


Figure 2. Use of Informal Language on Social Media Results

The data shows that the majority of students use informal language when posting on social media. 42.9% of respondents gave a score of 3, and 35.7% gave a score of 5, indicating a strong tendency toward using informal language on digital platforms. This choice reflects how the platform context often referred to as "Netspeak" influences language style (Crystal, 2003).

Stylistic Errors Can Cause Misunderstandings

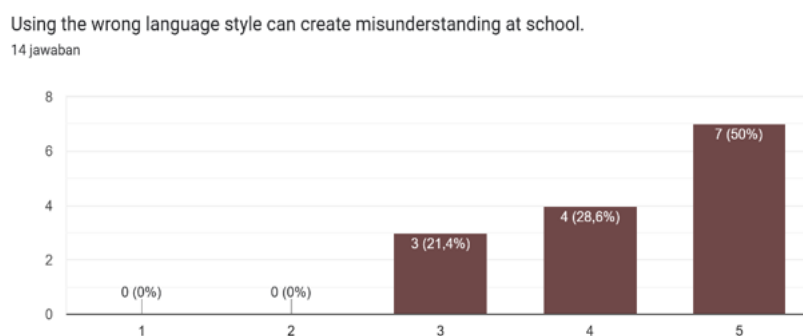


Figure 3. Stylistic Errors Can Cause Misunderstandings Results

The survey data show that 88.6% of respondents are aware of the importance of using appropriate stylistic styles in academic settings. This finding confirms that students understand that errors in language choice can lead to misunderstandings or be perceived as impolite, a concept rooted in the pragmatic context of language use (Lakoff, 1972).

Discussion

Based on the survey results, it appears that college students have a strong tendency to adjust their use of formal and informal language depending on who they are communicating with. This demonstrates linguistic awareness and social adaptability, which Bell (1984) describes as "responsive" style shifts toward the audience.

Regarding the use of informal language on social media, the results indicate that the media context significantly influences language choices. As Crystal (2011) suggests, digital

platforms often encourage a "written speech" style that prioritizes speed and intimacy over formal grammar.

Finally, the awareness of risks regarding inappropriate language styles reflects what Holmes (2013) identifies as sociolinguistic competence, the ability to choose the right words for the right context. Students recognize that academic environments require a specific register to maintain professional face and clarity (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Overall, students demonstrate proficiency in code-switching, an essential skill for navigating the diverse social and academic landscapes of university life (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015).

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that university students exhibit strong pragmatic awareness and are capable of differentiating formal and informal language based on context, audience, and medium. They frequently engage in code-switching, use informal styles in digital communication, and recognize the importance of appropriate language to avoid misunderstandings in academic environments. These findings highlight the essential role of sociolinguistic competence in effective communication and support the theoretical understanding of language style as a flexible, context-driven phenomenon.

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