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Formal and Informal English

Brian Richards

In my first article I pointed out that it was important for our students to be able to distinguish between formal and informal English so that they could then use the appropriate language at the appropriate time. In this article I want to look at some of the characteristics of the formal and informal modes, at 'register' - to use a technical term (1).

First, a working definition of formal and informal. By formal language I mean an essentially impersonal language, that of government announcements, editorials in newspapers and so on. By informal I mean the language of polite conversation, excluding slang; slang is, naturally, a feature of informal language, but for teaching purposes one has to ignore it; the reason is that slang can change so quickly that learning it is, more often than not, not worth the time and trouble as the words and expressions learned may already be obsolete or about to become so (2). The key to understanding the basic difference between formal and informal, then, lies in one’s recognising the function of the different modes: formal = impersonal = not considering the person addressed as an individual; informal = personal = addressing the other person as an individual and human being. As I hinted in the previous article, a knowledge of the informal mode will come in much more useful to our students in their later careers than will any mastery of the purely formal mode, because it will be with people as people that they will be dealing.

This said, we can now look at certain technical differences
between the two modes, while keeping their actual function well in mind.

1) I am talking here about British, not American English. The American speaker generally has no ear for register, in that he tends to use a mixture of formal and slang: there doesn’t, in fact, seem to be any generally accepted informal mode at all. The result is that the American speaker sounds by turns as if he’s swallowed a dictionary - long words are highly prized - or is engaged in bootlegging and other questionable activities. It follows that, as a language, American is greatly inferior to British in that it lacks nuances and flexibility.

2) Magazines such as ‘Time’ and ‘Newsweek’ contain a great deal of slang and a jargon known as journalese which present the foreign student with formidable problems. In language-learning terms, the effort spent on reading them is hard to justify except - as it so rarely happens - when the student is well advanced, with at least ten years’ study behind him.

1) The Verb. It is a commonplace that the verb is the most important word in the English language; and equally a commonplace that the active form is used much more often than the passive (3), at least in everyday, informal speech. This should surprise no-one, since the passive is a means of expressing impersonal - not personal - ideas. The active, on the other hand, calls for a personal subject, and is therefore used much more often than the passive in informal conversation. We can represent the main differences, then, in this way:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Formal</th>
<th>Informal</th>
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<tr>
<td>Impersonal</td>
<td>Personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impersonal subject ('it')</td>
<td>Personal subject ('I')</td>
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Passive used often       Active very much preferred

Here are different ways of expressing the same idea, and by referring to the paragraph above you should easily see which expression is formal, which informal;

'He said he was going to cut taxes'.  'It was announced that tax reductions would be effected'.'

You will notice here that the verb itself differs: in the Informal mode the simple 'cut' is used; whereas the Formal uses the rather grander 'effected'. This we should expect - that Formal language would be rather more pompous than the Informal;

3) Language teaching as a rule makes out the passive to be much more important than it really is: the teacher will often spend a long time going through tricky conversion exercises with his students, thus creating the impression that the passive is much used, and this brings us to one of the problems that students of English come up against sooner or later and which can produce some very bad headaches indeed - the verb + particle. Verb + particle means a common verb - such as 'come', 'put', 'make' - which changes its meaning according to the particle - a preposition such as 'in' 'up', 'away' (4); and it is a feature of Informal (and is to be found in the Formal mode as well). Sometimes the meaning of one of these verbs can be guessed from the context; but often the context provides no clue at all. Look at the following, for instance:

'They did him in'. 'She did herself up'. 'He tried to do me down'.
Unless one has learned the expression by heart, one simply can't make an intelligent guess here as the prepositions seem to have been added quite capriciously, without any rhyme or reason. Unhappily, any student who wishes to master English must learn these verbs - in a suitable context - by heart: there is no other way, and this information is always received with a notable lack of enthusiasm, which is not to be wondered at.

As I said, verb + particle is to be found in the Formal mode, but it is much commoner in the Informal:

'Prices were raised - They put the prices up - No news was received - The news didn't come through - He was seized by an uncontrollable passion - His feelings ran away with him'.

The student here has, of course, two distinct problems: in the first place, he must be able to recognise these verbs when he comes across them; in the second, he must be able to use them - or at least, use the 'everyday' ones - because if he doesn't he runs the risk of speaking a stilted, 'textbook' English.

To sum up, then, Informal English is a dynamic language in that it prefers the active, personal verb to the impersonal passive - people, in English, do things to one another rather than submit to things being done to them or wait for things to happen - and, as one would expect, this tells us something about the English character, as language is an expression of character. (5) English deals with concrete, tangible things, rather than with abstractions.

2) Other aspects. These need not concern us much, since in
teaching one has to establish priorities, and our students have plenty of work to do simply on the verb—which may look easy, but isn’t—in their three years at Keizai; particularly when one remembers that the first year (their second, in fact) will see a great deal of remedial work done. Briefly, other aspects arise from the fact that Formal English is likely to be modelled on the written word, whereas Informal will take speech as its model.

The essential difference between writing and speech, as far as we are concerned, is that the writer will try to make his meaning as clear as possible (6) and will therefore choose his words with some care: the assumption is that he will be writing to someone who will not be able to ask him at once what the meaning is if he does not understand. In speech, however, if we don’t understand what

6) Not always, naturally! People don’t write things simply in order to make themselves clear: they sometimes wish to confuse, sometimes tell halfttruths, sometimes tell deliberate lies. The view that language=communication is to put it mildly, a particularly jejune one which a moment’s reflection will show to be so.

5) Not many Englishmen can speak Italian well, for instance, although Italian is not a difficult language, once its somewhat complicated but mechanical grammar has been mastered. Englishmen can make themselves understood, of course, but find that getting the ‘feel’ of this highly impersonal language to be rather beyond them: translating literally, ‘It might think itself’ is a far cry from the straightforward English ‘I think’. At the same time it is only to be expected that American English is a mish-mash being the expression, as it is,
of a people who have no sense of their identity and seem further than ever from acquiring one.

is said, we can always ask the speaker to explain what be means in other terms. As a result there is no need for us, when speaking, to take as much care as when we write, and this results in the spoken word's being - on the whole - much less accurate than the written one: the vocabulary is less precise; grammatical conventions are not always observed; there is a certain inconsistency - 'The police was there, you see. They charged the demonstrators'; word order and syntax are unlikely to be respected; and the afterthought is a feature too. You can see the difference in the following examples, I think:

'Place the full spool on the left hand spindle and thread the tape past the magnetic heads on to the take up spool.'

This is the sort of instruction one is likely to come across in a taperecorder manual. However, someone instructing another would be unlikely to use such language. Instead, this is the kind of thing he might say:

'Put that one there. That's right. Now pull it past that part. Yes. Now wind it round that one.'

You will see that in the spoken instructions, the speaker uses pronouns instead of nouns - 'that one' for 'spool' - because he does not need to use a noun: both he and the person he's talking to know that it's a spool. The interesting thing here is that anyone reading the first example would know that it referred to a taperecorder; but anyone reading the transcription of the spoken instructions would not be able to understand because no clues at
all are given, and the language is so vague as to be almost meaningless except to the two people involved in the activity.

What I'm getting at here is that our students tend to use the names for things when names are simply not necessary; this is because they have been taught a Formal, rather than Informal, English to start with; and as a result their speech tends to sound stilted and even affected, and certainly a little unnatural (7).

But, as I said earlier, this doesn't matter quite as much as learning how to use the verb; because once one has mastered the verb - in itself a difficult feat - then the other aspects tend to become simpler, automatically.

This, then, is what I think our students ought to be able to do: hold an informal conversation in an informal way, and be able to distinguish between these two modes of expression. All this takes some time and does mean that the student has to make a certain effort and results - although with a little goodwill they can be guaranteed - will take some time to come as the student needs to look at English with a fresh eye and unlearn several fallacies.

The first of these is that a large vocabulary is desirable. In fact, a large vocabulary isn't nearly as important as being able to control structures and use simple, everyday words and expressions (especially verb+particle). The tendency in language teaching here in Japan is to concentrate on getting the student to acquire a large vocabulary, which he then finds himself unable to use. This is rather like putting the cart before the horse; and in any case, why should one attempt to acquire a large, unwieldy vocabulary when our dictionaries have already done the work for us? (8)
7) Experienced language teachers also tend to speak rather too 'correctly' since they are concerned with teaching a 'correct' rather than an 'incorrect' English and are apt to develop mannerisms. I think this is unavoidable. Returning from a visit to Greece once, I chatted to some British students on board the ship and was rather annoyed when they took me for a foreigner; this was not because they had heard me speaking Greek and Italian to members of the crew and other passengers, but because my own English was too precise and exact: the result of teaching an acceptable, polite English. Language teachers in my experience at least, also tend to swear rather more in private than the average person, perhaps because it can be a little frustrating to have to use a 'correct' English all the time in class.

8) Naturally the advanced student will need a wide vocabulary; but at this stage it is unnecessary and even harmful in that the time spent on superannuated literary works could better be spent on work bearing some relation to what the student's real needs are: understanding and speaking English.

The second is that 'difficult' books are better then 'easy' ones. The student is sometimes convinced that it is better for him to struggle through, say, John Stuart Mill (rather than read the, probably, quite adequate translations available) than read a book—such as those published in the Longman Simplified Series—which have been specially designed for him, and which—in general—provide him with the kind of English he needs to acquire, at this stage in his work.

What our students must do, then, is to use material that has been prepared with their actual needs in mind. There is plenty of this available; but there is also plenty of highly unsuitable—not
to say idiotic - material on the market; and in my next article I want to look at some examples of idiocy, since there is a certain grisly amusement to be derived from them.

9) The underlying assumption behind the work of many textbook writers, broadcasters, etc., is that the student of English is a moron. Today, 29th March, I heard a programme on NHK which seemed to me to reach new depths in stupidity: some-one had received a present of wax, artificial grapes from a Japanese friend: and he and his family had eaten them—he wanted to know what they were! It is likely that a small child might eat a wax grape by mistake; but surely not a grown-up! Yet this kind of nonsense is commonplace in language teaching.