

## REGISTER VARIATION AMONG ISLAMIC STUDENTS: A STUDY OF LANGUAGE USE IN HIGH AND LOW LEVEL

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### ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan variasi register yang digunakan oleh mahasiswa dalam situasi komunikasi formal dan informal. Fokus utama penelitian ini adalah bagaimana mahasiswa menyesuaikan gaya bahasa mereka saat berbicara dengan dosen dibandingkan dengan saat berbicara dengan sesama teman, serta bagaimana kesadaran mereka terhadap perbedaan tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif, dengan teknik pengumpulan data berupa wawancara semi-terstruktur terhadap lima orang mahasiswa program studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris di Universitas Islam Negeri Antasari. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa secara aktif menyesuaikan register bahasa berdasarkan konteks situasi dan lawan bicara. Dalam situasi formal, seperti ketika berinteraksi dengan dosen, mereka cenderung menggunakan bahasa yang lebih sopan, baku, dan terstruktur. Sebaliknya, dalam situasi informal bersama teman, gaya bahasa mereka lebih santai, fleksibel, bahkan sering mencampur bahasa Indonesia dan Inggris. Para partisipan juga menunjukkan kesadaran yang tinggi terhadap pentingnya kemampuan beradaptasi dalam berbahasa sesuai konteks. Temuan ini memperkuat pentingnya pemahaman tentang variasi register dalam pembelajaran bahasa dan komunikasi di lingkungan akademik.

**Kata kunci : Variasi Register, Sociolinguistik, Tingkat Tinggi dan Rendah, Penggunaan Bahasa**

### ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe the variation of language registers used by university students in formal and informal communication contexts. The primary focus of the research is on how students adjust their language style when speaking with lecturers compared to when conversing with peers, as well as their awareness of these differences. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach, with data collected through semi-structured interviews involving five students from the English Language Education program at Antasari State Islamic University. The findings reveal that students actively adapt their language register according to the context and their interlocutors. In formal situations, such as interactions with lecturers, they tend to use more polite, formal, and structured language. Conversely, in informal settings with peers, their language becomes more relaxed, flexible, and often involves code-switching between Indonesian and English. The participants also demonstrated a high level of awareness regarding the importance of linguistic adaptability based on context. These findings highlight the importance of understanding register variation in language learning and communication within academic settings.

**Keywords : Register Variation, Sociolinguistics, High and Low Level, Language Use**

## INTRODUCTION

In the context of higher education, students are constantly engaged in various communicative situations that demand the use of different language varieties. The shifts between formal and informal settings reflect students' linguistic awareness and their ability to adapt. The capacity to switch between formal and informal registers is a crucial skill in modern communication, as it demonstrates not only linguistic competence but also sensitivity to context and audience (Nuri, 2023). Register adaptation is particularly essential in today's rapidly evolving global landscape, especially in the field of English language education (Nuri, 2023). Therefore, understanding the differences between formal and informal communication styles is vital for maintaining effective communication, both in spoken and written forms (Akhtursunova & Aubakirova, 2024).

Halliday's theory of register explains that variations in language use are influenced by context, including the subject matter (field), the relationship between speaker and listener (tenor), and the mode of communication (mode) (Lukin et al., 2011). Register is not merely a social phenomenon; it is also manifested in mental processes and linguistic production that vary across contexts (Szmrecsanyi & Engel, 2021). In academic settings, tenor—the relationship between students and lecturers—plays a significant role. Students are expected to use more formal language when communicating with lecturers, including the use of appropriate vocabulary, complex sentence structures, and a respectful tone (Putri & Putra, 2024). Formal language is characterized by complex syntax, minimal use of personal pronouns, and an absence of slang or colloquial expressions (Akhtursunova & Aubakirova, 2024). Conversely, when speaking with peers, students tend to use more casual expressions, slang, and code-switching. Informal language is typically more spontaneous, relaxed, and used in personal contexts such as communication with friends or family (Akhtursunova & Aubakirova, 2024).

Recent studies indicate that students frequently adjust their language style based on

communicative goals and interlocutors. For instance, Muslimawati (2022) found that Indonesian English students tend to use formal expressions during classroom presentations to show respect to lecturers, while adopting informal language when interacting with peers. Similarly, Manurung et al. (2024) observed that teachers and students employ various language styles—formal, consultative, casual, and intimate—depending on the context of their classroom conversations. These findings suggest that in academic settings, students often employ more formal structures in writing and discussions, while opting for simpler and more interactive styles in informal communication. The use of appropriate communication strategies in classroom settings is crucial for the success of English language learning (Muslimawati, 2022). These shifts are not random but are carried out strategically to meet social expectations and communication objectives.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students tend to mix different language forms, including local dialects, slang, English, and even Arabic, in their online communication (Putri & Putra, 2024). In practice, EFL students often combine English with local linguistic patterns to express themselves more creatively on social media (Putri & Putra, 2024).

Although formal and informal registers are often viewed as distinct forms of communication, they may overlap and create rich variations in communicative styles (Akhtursunova & Aubakirova, 2024).

The phenomenon of code-switching and register blending is particularly prominent among Generation Z students who have grown up in the digital era. They frequently alternate between English and Indonesian not only out of necessity but also as a form of identity expression and group affiliation (Putri & Putra, 2024). The rise of international mobility and the internationalization of higher education has created significant opportunities for informal language learning within university environments (Bruen & Erdocia, 2025). However, these increasingly multilingual campus environments are often underutilized in the context of language education (Bruen & Erdocia, 2025).

The level of formality in language acquisition even becomes a crucial variable that modulates the cognitive effects of multilingualism (Mohammed et al., 2025). While no direct relationship has been found between general multilingualism and working memory, the degree of formality in language learning has emerged as a determining factor (Mohammed et al., 2025).

Despite growing interest in language variation and sociolinguistic dynamics, there remains a scarcity of qualitative studies that deeply explore how students consciously adjust their language use in both academic and everyday social contexts. Most existing research has focused primarily on written academic English, with limited attention given to the spoken communication strategies students use across various settings (Manurung et al., 2024). This study seeks to address that gap by focusing on students' oral language use in formal (high-register) and informal (low-register) contexts.

Accordingly, this research aims to explore students' awareness, experiences, and strategies in adjusting their language varieties across different communicative situations. By understanding how and why students shift their language styles based on context, educators can better support the development of students' pragmatic and sociolinguistic competencies.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Research Design

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to illustrate how university students adjust their use of language registers in various communicative situations, both formal and informal. This approach was chosen as it enables the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives within their real-life contexts. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is particularly appropriate when the researcher seeks to explore the meanings, experiences, and interpretations of individuals in relation to a specific phenomenon. The primary objective of this study is to thoroughly explore students' understanding,

experiences, and reflections on language variation based on communicative contexts.

The participants of this study were five students from the English Language Education Program at Antasari State Islamic University. They were selected through purposive sampling, a technique in which participants are chosen based on specific characteristics deemed relevant to the research objectives. In this case, the participants were selected because of their active involvement in both academic and social activities, which positioned them to provide meaningful insights into language use across formal and informal contexts. This technique aligns with (Creswell, 2014) to select individuals who can provide rich, detailed, and contextually relevant data related to the phenomenon being studied.

The main research instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide. The guide was developed based on two key areas of inquiry: Language Use in Formal Situations (High Level) and Language Use in Informal Situations (Low Level). The questions were designed to be open-ended in order to allow participants to respond broadly and in depth, based on their personal experiences. The use of semi-structured interviews follows Creswell's (2014) methodological framework, which highlights the flexibility of this technique in qualitative research, allowing the researcher to explore new themes that emerge during the conversation while maintaining focus on the core research topics.

### Data Collection Technique

The data collection technique used in this study was semi-structured interviews. This method allowed participants the freedom to elaborate on their experiences in detail, while also enabling the researcher to explore new issues that emerged during the conversation. The interviews were conducted individually and took place in a conducive and comfortable environment to ensure that participants felt at ease in sharing their stories.

### Data Analysis

The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, as outlined by

Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis was conducted through several stages, including data transcription, comprehensive reading, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, theme naming, and the construction of the final narrative. The analytical process was carried out inductively, with themes emerging from the field data without being constrained by pre-existing assumptions. The primary focus of the analysis was to identify patterns in register use, including shifts in language style, vocabulary choices, as well as instances of code-switching and code-mixing across various communicative situations.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Language Use in High Level (Formal Situations)

The researcher found that students as participants in this research were expressing high level communication through their interaction in the class with lecturer or in a presentation.

Participants reported that they consciously avoid using informal expressions, slang, or colloquial language when interacting with lecturers. Word choice is particularly emphasized; they tend to use polite and standard forms, as illustrated by first participant who stated,

*"I usually use formal language that sounds more proper, for example, I prefer using the word 'saya' instead of 'aku'."*

Participant 1 stated that they usually use formal and polite language when speaking with lecturers: *"I usually speak formally and politely, not like I'm bossing around or correcting the lecturer..."*

They also noted that during presentations, their language is still formal but not overly rigid: *"During presentations, I also use formal language, but not too stiff. Like, I say 'saya' instead of 'aku' and maybe add a bit of humor to ease the mood."* The first participant emphasizes politeness and careful word choice to avoid misunderstandings, noting the importance of balancing formality with a relaxed tone by occasionally using jokes. This shows a flexible but respectful approach to formal language.

Participant 2 mentioned: *"When talking to lecturers or doing a presentation, I usually speak*

*more politely. Like saying, 'Ma'am, this topic is really important'"*

Participant 3 described using formal language during presentations: *"I use formal language during presentations... but when discussing with groupmates, it depends on the situation, sometimes not that formal."* Participant 3 adapts to the formality of presentations but becomes more casual when working with peers, suggesting a situational awareness of formal expectations.

Phrases such as *"maaf Bu, saya ingin bertanya"* (excuse me, Ma'am, I would like to ask a question) are usually used by participants to demonstrate respect. Participant 4 said: *"If I talk to lecturers or during presentations, I speak politely and more structured. Like, 'Excuse me, Ma'am, I have a question...'"*

Additionally, during presentations, students strive to maintain clear sentence structure for better comprehension while also incorporating elements that build rapport with the audience—such as providing relevant examples or using light humor to ease the atmosphere.

Participant 5 explained: *"When I talk to lecturers or present something, I usually use formal and structured language."* They also display sensitivity in avoiding potentially offensive or overly blunt terms, opting instead for more neutral and respectful alternatives. This demonstrates an awareness of linguistic etiquette. Likewise, tone of voice is adjusted to sound professional yet approachable.

These findings reflect a strong sociolinguistic competence among the students, specifically their ability to select appropriate linguistic forms in accordance with the social context. This aligns with Halliday's theory of register, which posits that language variation is influenced by three contextual elements: field (the subject matter), tenor (the relationship between speakers), and mode (the channel of communication). In this case, the presence of lecturers as figures of authority prompts students to adopt a formal register as a means of showing respect and employing effective academic communication strategies.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that students understand the importance of adjusting their language not only due to academic demands but also as a reflection of internalized values such as politeness and professionalism. They recognize that the ability to use appropriate language in formal contexts is a crucial communication skill, both within higher education and in their future professional lives.

### Language Use in Low Level (Informal Situations)

In informal situations, the researcher found that students feel freer to express themselves in terms of word choice, sentence structure, and tone of speech. They tend to use everyday language, colloquial expressions, and frequently mix Indonesian with English.

Participant 1 explained how their speech adapts based on their interlocutor's background: *"I usually adjust the way I talk depending on the person... like if they speak in another regional language, I'll just use Indonesian. I feel like I can hide my accent or background... but if I feel it's not good, I stick to my own principles."* This statement shows a high level of pragmatic competence and linguistic awareness. Students adjust their language based on their peers' backgrounds, such as regional origin or linguistic habits—shifting, for instance, to Banjar language or maintaining Indonesian as a neutral medium. This adaptation reflects sensitivity to the social context and the characteristics of their interlocutors.

Participant 2 noted: *"With friends, it's more relaxed, sometimes we use slang or mix languages."* Code-mixing emerged as a prominent characteristic in these informal interactions. It occurred spontaneously and contextually, often in the form of inserting English words or phrases into Indonesian sentences. For example, one student said: *"aku struggle banget ngerjain tugas nih"* (I'm really struggling to finish this assignment). This practice is often employed to convey meaning more precisely or to better align with the intended nuance in a foreign language, as well as to express solidarity and closeness within their social group.

Participant 3 shared: *"I usually talk casually or informally. Like after class, we might joke around."* This highlights the role of humor and expressiveness in informal communication. Elements of humor and emotional expression are more prevalent in informal conversations, such as the use of jokes, slang, and a relaxed tone of voice, which strengthens peer relationships and group cohesion.

Participant 4 said: *"With friends, I just talk casually. We mix Indonesian and English."* This reflects casual code-switching as a social norm and shows how bilingual fluency is used strategically. In bilingual or multilingual societies, code-mixing is not merely a linguistic deficiency, but a deliberate communicative strategy that signifies membership in a particular community and demonstrates a level of comfort and familiarity between speakers.

Participant 5 mentioned: *"When I'm with friends, I'm more relaxed... and sometimes use slang words too."* This further confirms that informal contexts allow for freer, more expressive communication. The relaxed tone, use of slang, and expressive language in peer conversations reveal a strong contrast with the formal language used in academic contexts, reinforcing the idea that social relationships and environment significantly influence register variation.

### CONCLUSION

Based on the interview findings and subsequent analysis, it can be concluded that students consciously adjust their language register according to the situation and the interlocutor. In formal contexts, such as communicating with lecturers, they tend to use polite, structured, and standard language. Conversely, in informal settings—such as conversing with peers—they adopt a more relaxed and spontaneous style, often incorporating code-mixing between Indonesian and English. This awareness of register variation reflects a developing pragmatic competence that evolves through academic experience. Furthermore, university learning environments indirectly contribute to students' ability to select appropriate registers, which is a crucial component

of effective communication in both academic and social settings.

This study suggests that register variation should be explicitly taught in language education, particularly through practical activities such as role plays or simulations of formal and informal interactions. Instructors are also encouraged to support students in increasing their awareness of context-appropriate language use. For future research, it is recommended to involve a larger number of participants and to broaden the scope, including language use on social media and in digital communication contexts.

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