Register: degrees of formality

VOCABULARY PRACTICE
UPPER-INTERMEDIATE | B2

Name: _____ Date: _____

1 Match each precise term with its definition.

1 register ____	**a** a variety of language associated with a particular social situation or level of formality
2 formality gradient ____	**b** a continuous scale ranging from highly formal to highly informal language use
3 discourse marker ____	**c** a word or phrase that organises discourse or signals the speaker's stance, such as 'well' or 'however'
4 hedging ____	**d** language used to soften a claim or reduce the speaker's commitment to its certainty
5 politeness strategy ____	**e** a linguistic technique used to minimise potential offence or maintain social harmony
6 tenor ____	**f** the relationship between participants in a communicative situation, including their relative status and familiarity
7 field ____	**g** the subject matter or topic being discussed in a communicative situation
8 mode ____	**h** the channel or medium of communication, such as spoken or written
9 speech act ____	**i** an utterance that performs an action, such as requesting, promising or apologising
10 face-threatening act ____	**j** an utterance that risks damaging the listener's or speaker's social image or self-esteem

2 Choose the word with the most suitable connotation.

1 For a variety of language tied to a social situation: register / a single universal style.

2 For a scale from highly formal to informal: formality gradient / a fixed binary.

3 For a word organising discourse or signalling stance: discourse marker / random filler.

4 For softening a claim to reduce commitment: hedging / blunt assertion.

5 For a technique minimising potential offence: politeness strategy / deliberate rudeness.

6 For the relationship between communicative participants: tenor / an unrelated factor.

Register: degrees of formality

7 For the channel or medium of communication: mode / the topic itself.

8 For an utterance risking damage to social image: a face-threatening act / a neutral remark.

3 Complete the register-studies collocations with one word.

1 an appropriate _____ (= language variety for the situation)

2 a _____ gradient (= scale from formal to informal)

3 a _____ marker (= organises discourse, e.g. 'however')

4 use _____ (= softening a claim)

5 a politeness _____ (= technique to minimise offence)

6 the _____ of discourse (= relationship between participants)

7 perform a speech _____ (= an utterance that acts)

8 a face-threatening _____ (= risks damaging social image)

Register: degrees of formality

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4 Complete the case notes with words and phrases from the box.

discourse marker | face-threatening act | field | formality gradient | hedging | mode | politeness strategy | register | speech act | tenor

Case A: The email's 1 _____ shifted noticeably partway through, moving from formal opening to a much more casual closing.
Case B: 'However' functioned as a 2 _____, signalling contrast between the two clauses.
Case C: She employed 3 _____ throughout, using phrases like 'it might be worth considering' rather than stating her recommendation directly.
Case D: The apology functioned as a clear 4 _____, an utterance performing the action of apologising rather than merely describing regret.
Case E: Requesting a colleague's overdue report constitutes a genuine 5 _____, since it risks implying criticism, and skilled speakers often soften such requests using an appropriate 6 _____.
Case F: Analysts distinguished 7 _____, the subject matter, from 8 _____, the relationship between speakers, and 9 _____, whether the interaction was spoken or written, when analysing why the same message felt appropriate in one context but not another.
Case G: Position on the 10 _____ shifted considerably depending on the audience addressed.

5 Read the text and answer the questions briefly.

Politeness as strategic communication

Pragmatics researchers studying politeness argue that seemingly indirect or hedged language often serves a genuinely strategic communicative function rather than reflecting mere vagueness or indecisiveness. A request phrased as 'I don't suppose you could possibly help me with this?' accomplishes considerably more socially than a blunt imperative, since the elaborate hedging explicitly acknowledges the listener's right to refuse, thereby reducing the face-threatening potential of the request itself. Cultures and languages vary considerably in how much indirectness convention requires for a given speech act, meaning direct translation of a polite request across languages can sometimes inadvertently sound demanding or, conversely, oddly evasive if the underlying politeness conventions differ significantly between the two linguistic communities involved.

1 What do pragmatics researchers argue seemingly indirect language often serves? _____

2 Give the example request used to illustrate this in the text. _____

Register: degrees of formality

3 What does the elaborate hedging in this example explicitly acknowledge? _____

4 What does this do to the face-threatening potential of the request? _____

5 What do cultures and languages vary considerably in? _____

6 What can happen when a polite request is directly translated across languages? _____

6 Rewrite each sentence using the word in capitals. Do not change the meaning.

1 She softened her claim using cautious, uncertain language. HEDGING _____

2 The request risked damaging the listener's social image. FACE-THREATENING ACT _____

3 The word signalled contrast and organised the discourse. DISCOURSE MARKER _____

4 The apology performed the actual act of apologising. SPEECH ACT _____

OVER TO YOU

Write a 120-150 word account analysing how politeness strategies and hedging shape a specific type of request, distinguishing observation from pragmatic theory.

[ ] Use at least twelve target expressions. [ ] Control connotation carefully. [ ] Avoid unsupported assumptions.

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ANSWER KEY

1 Precise terms

1 a 2 b 3 c 4 d 5 e 6 f 7 g 8 h 9 i 10 j

2 Connotation

1 register 2 formality gradient 3 discourse marker 4 hedging 5 politeness strategy 6 tenor 7 mode 8 a face-threatening act

3 Collocations

1 register 2 formality 3 discourse 4 hedging 5 strategy 6 tenor 7 act 8 act

4 Case notes

1 register 2 discourse marker 3 hedging 4 speech act 5 face-threatening act
6 politeness strategy 7 field 8 tenor 9 mode 10 formality gradient

5 Reading - suggested answers

1 A genuinely strategic communicative function rather than reflecting mere vagueness or indecisiveness.
2 'I don't suppose you could possibly help me with this?'
3 The listener's right to refuse.
4 Reduces it.
5 How much indirectness convention requires for a given speech act.
6 It can sometimes inadvertently sound demanding or oddly evasive.

6 Rewriting - possible answers

1 She used hedging. 2 The request was a face-threatening act.
3 The word was a discourse marker. 4 The apology was a speech act.

Over to you

Answers will vary. Check lexical precision, appropriate connotation and separation of fact from inference.