ALSO BY TONY HOAGLAND

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Poetic Principles and Practice

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VII

VOICE AS SPEECH REGISTERS

High, Middle, and Low

A HANDFUL OF TERMS INEVITABLY ARISE WHEN DIS-cussing the role of word choice in the construction of poetic voice: diction, tone, pitch, and register. These terms are not identical in meaning, but for simplicity's sake we will use the term *speech register* to sketch out the basic concept of high, middle, and low speech.

The "register" of speech is most often described by metaphors of *altitude*; we say, high register, middle register, or low register. These are different ways of describing the degree of formality of a particular speaker or piece of writing. Such registers of speech are the finely tuned mechanism that tells the reader something about who is speaking or how they feel about the subject they are speaking of. Is the speaker sophisticated, educated, average, plain, or vulgar? Is the speech pretentious, condescending, cold, flattering, daring, utilitarian, incisive, angry, or neutral? A host of nuances and implications are attached to all word choices and word combinations.

To read poetry with an attention to voice is to quickly become more conscious of speech registers and their intricate powers of inflection, and to grow alert to the ways in which a speaker is

relating to her reader and her subject matter. Every good voice poet is skilled at the modulation of register.

Speech register is, as they say, not rocket science. It isn't necessary to be a literary scholar or analytically trained to understand what we already intuitively know as native English speakers. The whole history of our listening lives has already sharpened our instincts about speech register and about how our word choices vary situationally. You speak differently to your four-year-old daughter than you do to the bank manager.

In English, and in American English especially, speech register is a particularly potent and versatile element of poetic voice, because English has an extraordinarily large lexicon, or vocabulary. We have a rich reservoir of synonyms, or alternative ways of saying the same thing. Thus our poems have a vast range of expressive possibilities to choose from. Our inflections, connotations, and nuances transform depending on what signifiers we use.

The three sentences below have essentially the same narrative content, but their tones are distinct from each other in ways we recognize as a matter of voice, or inflection.

We had lunch at the 4th Street Diner. (Middle)
We took our midday repast at Chez Panisse. (High)
We pigged out at Burger King. (Low)

Both the proper nouns and the verbs of these sentences tell us much about the speakers and the way they intend to be heard.

Elizabeth Alexander's poem "Boston Year" opens in a middle register, a pitch that is direct, clear, plain, and highly effective for her retrospective narrative.

My first week in Cambridge a car full of white boys
tried to run me off the road, and spit through the window,
open to ask directions. I was always asking directions
and always driving: to an Armenian market
in Watertown to buy figs and string cheese, apricots,
dark spices and olives from barrels, tubes of paste
with unreadable Arabic labels. I ate
stuffed grape leaves and watched my lips swell in the
mirror.
The floors of my apartment would never come clean.
Whenever I saw other colored people
in bookshops, or museums, or cafeterias, I'd gasp,
smile shyly, but they'd disappear before I spoke.

The middle register of speech—the one Alexander employs here—is the level at which most of our daily conversation takes place, and so we hardly notice it stylistically—it is the most "natural," neutral, and functional register, the one we use to say we are going to the store or to ask a friend to open a window.

Alexander's speaker describes encounters of ugly racial affront and prejudice, but the middle style she chooses for her narration is neutral and undramatic. Why? This matter-of-factness of tone isn't accidental; for one thing, it communicates the levelheaded-

ness of the speaker's character in the face of insult, and perhaps in some ways her subsequent lack of expectation of the world. Perhaps this flat factual narration evokes our sympathy on her behalf, because she is not expressing it. Or perhaps the speaker is withholding her sympathy for her own former self until later in the poem. For the moment she wants to narrate the facts as they are or were, showing neither self-pity nor outrage, but leaving the reader to draw his own conclusions. Such an objective middle speech register is strategic.

By contrast, consider the opening of Mary Ruefle's pastoral poem, "Diary of Action and Repose," which is pitched at a higher, more ornate language register:

> In some small substation of the universe
> the bullfrogs begin to puff out their mouths.
> The night-blooming jasmine is fertilized
> in the dark. I can smell it.
> And then someone unseen and a little ways off
> picks up his flute and asserts his identity
> in a very sweet way.

Here is speech conscious of itself as a poetic performance, and we intuit that the speaker is enjoying her own constructions of language. Such a poem becomes more about the way the speaker speaks than what she is saying. "In some small substation of the universe" turns out to be a frog pond or riverbank. The speaker's vocabulary is not just polysyllabic and precise, but elevated, formal, and ornate. One effect of this register is that the speaker is linguistically asserting her own

originality of perspective—she sees the world from a lofty distance. On the one hand, our speaker acknowledges the relative unimportance of her personal landscape when compared to the universe itself; nonetheless, the bullfrogs are here and the night-blooming jasmine—and her elaborate language dignifies and ennobles them.

"Diary of Action and Repose" is about the beauty of an idyllic moment, and we sense that the poet is herself in a languorous mood, in no hurry to rush through her pastoral narrative. Her verbal constructions are ornate in a way that relishes its own expansions and contractions. Where this speaker could have said, "Someone is playing a flute," she says instead that someone "asserts his identity in a very sweet way." Like the earlier phrase about the substation of the universe, the thought encoded here is not just stylistically but also conceptually complex—to play music, the speaker implies, is to "assert your identity." The observation leads the mind of the reader into an interpretive digression. We enjoy the polysyllabic indirectness of Ruefle's constructions, and we know that we are in the hands of a confident and stylish speaker who is showing off a little, inviting us into the dance of language as much as into a story. This is a sophisticated lyricist.

In the middle of this performance, however, we encounter an abrupt appearance of plain, middle-register speech: "I can smell it," says the speaker. Such a sentence shows us the way in which different speech registers interact and counterpoint each other in the progression of a poem. It is like watching a dancer in the middle of a long flying leap put one shoe down firmly on the ground, as if to say, "I am ordinary, too, and I know where I am." *I can smell it.*

Another, quite different example of high-register speech can be found in the opening of Robert Pinsky's poem "Evolution of the Host," in which the speaker uses a detached scientific or anthropological diction to describe the evolution of human beings. The tone captures our attention with its stilted, "textbook" artifice, especially when we recognize that the poem is describing the very act in which the poem is engaged—the miraculous act of human speech:

> The primate that rose to dominate that planet
> Communicated with its peers in a code of grunts
> Exhaled from the orifice of ingestion and shaped
> By lips and inner membranes, muscles and teeth.
>
> The creature communicated with its descendants,
> By memorizing chains of those same brute sounds
> In patterns urgent as the dance of a worker bee
> Miming the distance and bearings of the pollen.

The tone of "Evolution of the Host" may seem strangely clinical, even frigid in its rhetorical distancing, but it renews the story from this uncommon approach. The effect serves one of poetry's many potential possibilities: to make something new and, in its way, freshly wondrous by defamiliarizing it. Here, the agent of the strangeness is diction, or speech register, pitched in the affectless vocabulary of a rigid university lecturer. Like the sample from Ruefle's poem, Pinsky's speech register is "high" and

erudite; but where Ruefle's register is self-conscious, playful, and self-admiring, Pinsky's speaker articulates with an austere objectivity, dedicated solely to the information of his discourse. Here, an analytical vocal detachment is part of what makes the poem compelling.

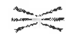
High and low speech registers are more self-conscious in their pitch than the middle speech register. They call attention to themselves, and they often identify their speakers as sophisticated or vulgar, high-class or low-class in origin or intention. A high diction may be an attempt to impress the reader, and a low-class speaker might try to shock us—as the Latin poet Catullus often does. But to put it like that is not entirely accurate, either. It might be truer to say that voice poets are just talkers who love to try on different ways of saying a thing. Poets who love the exercise of voice are curious, unafraid, and enjoy themselves in the exhilarating game of exaggerated speech.

Catullus, famous for his erotic vulgarity, thoroughly enjoys the lower speech registers. In "This One Boy II," he insultingly addresses an erotic rival:

> Aurelius, king of gluttons once and future,
> you want to fuck my love, and you don't hide it.
> You're always there, flirting;
> you hang on him, try every line
> but all in vain: I'll snag you
> before you set the snare.
> If you weren't so skilled I'd shut up,

but now the boy has learned lust
and thirst—lay off, and I'll lay off;
if not, you'll find me up your ass.

Catullus wants to shock us a little with his graphic bluntness and violence of emotion, and he could be called the "most real" of the three poetic speakers featured in this chapter. Surely he is the least polite, the least elegant, the most passionately "visceral" in his reactions to the world. This voice combines anger and humor, and makes full acknowledgment of the carnal, beastly aspect of human nature. Paradoxically, however, the speaker is having a good time in his social warfare of love, lust, and insult. Even in less-skilled hands than his, the lower registers of speech—vitriol and profanity—have undeniable force; they radiate life, gusto, and heat, and that helps explain why Catullus's poetry—when not being culturally censored—has been popular for two thousand years.



Part of what draws us to poetry is a love of language and the myriad ways it can be twisted, augmented, and torqued. A voice poet is skillful at this kind of linguistic manipulation, often shifting registers in a way that surprises or delights or terrifies her reader. The more poems we read, the more we become comfortable with, and sensitive to, variations from the middle register of daily speech. Such deviations are exciting, be it an elevation or demotion from the normal level of diction, or an exaggeratedly idiosyncratic manner of speech. Much can happen on the page that doesn't or can't or won't in life. The voice poet invites the

reader to join him in assuming a register regal and distant, like Ruefle's, or hot and close, like Catullus's. In poetry, the full range of human nature is on exhibit, and the performance on the page liberates us from our habitual self-restraint. Even when a poet stays steadily within a single speech register while reporting on heartbreak, as in Alexander's poem, that too can elicit complex recognitions in the reader. The speech registers of a poem not only reveal who their speakers are but also, in some way, provide readers with access to dimensions of their own selves.

For exercises corresponding to this chapter, please see page 138.

Chapter VII: Voice as Speech Registers

Exercise 1: The Thing About Julius Caesar Is That He Really Liked to Boogie

As the chapter on speech registers makes clear, to move between high, middle, and low tones in a poem is one of the most effective ways for the personality of the speaker to display itself through voice. What does it mean to shift registers in a poem? Recall, from Chapter V, the first lines of Marie Howe's poem "Reading Ovid":

> The thing about those Greeks and Romans is that
> at least mythologically,
>
> they could get mad. . . .

When Howe takes on the subject of Roman gods, the first poetic choice she makes is to lower the tone of the discourse through her use of vernacular speech registers: "the thing about . . ." she says, "they could get mad." In a sense she is "translating" the classical stories into contemporary diction and a more intimate mode, thus reassuring the reader that this allegedly "high culture" tells stories that we regular middle-brow mortals can relate to.

As with any skill, the best way to get a handle on speech registers is to learn by *doing* rather than by thinking. Howe's stylistic experiment is easy enough to use as the launching pad for your own poem. Consider, for example, a poem that might open,

"The thing about Julius Caesar is that he really liked to boogie." Or, "The thing about those Jane Austen girls, they partied like Beyoncé." Thus your poem from the start creates a speaker who is explaining a "high-register" subject matter in low or middle register. Take a highbrow subject and treat it in a lowbrow manner and see where it takes you.

Exercise 2: Low Subject, High Style

This poetic experiment with the tone of a speaker's voice also works in the reverse direction: not by treating high subject matter in a low register, but by elevating the low into a high mode. It is invigorating to take a subject usually thought too humble for poetry and treat it with the verbal style of high poetry. "Ode to My Hamburger," for example, has potential; ditto "Ode to My Asthma Inhaler," "Ode to My Father's Silence," "Ode to the Disposable Diaper."

Here's what such an exercise in stretching the conventions of speech register looks like in the hands of the adroit poet Barbara Hamby:

ODE TO MY 1977 TOYOTA

> Engine like a Singer sewing machine, where have you
> not carried me—to dance class, grocery shopping,
> into the heart of darkness and back again? O the fruit
> you've transported—cherries, peaches, blueberries,
> watermelons, thousands of Fuji apples—books,
> and all my dark thoughts, the giddy ones, too,

like bottles of champagne popped at the wedding of two people
who will pass each other on the street as strangers
in twenty years. Ronald Reagan was president when I walked
into Big Chief Motors and saw you glimmering
on the lot like a slice of broiled mahi mahi or sushi
without its topknot of tuna. Remember the months
I drove you to work singing "Some Enchanted Evening"?
Those were scary times. All I thought about
was getting on I-10 with you and not stopping. . . .

If you are in doubt about what high-register English poetry sounds like, glance at the language and syntax of one of the great odes of Romantic poetry such as John Keats's "To Sleep":

O soft embalmer of the still midnight,
Shutting, with careful fingers and benign,
Our gloom-pleas'd eyes, embower'd from the light,
Enshaded in forgetfulness divine:
O soothest Sleep! if so it please thee, close
In midst of this thine hymn my willing eyes,
Or wait the "Amen," ere thy poppy throws
Around my bed its lulling charities.

Then, like Hamby, ventriloquize Keats's high-register language onto your chosen (humble) topic, allowing the language and the syntax of the poem to elevate it.

Exercise 3: Using Contradiction Between Speech Register and Social Occasion

Another way to play with, and thus to learn about, the manipulation of poetic registers is to write a poem whose *stated* intent is different from its *true* intent. Thus, to write a poem of apology for something for which the speaker is in fact *not* sorry creates a tonal tension that is intriguing and revealing. Similarly, to write a thank-you poem for something that one would not feel gratitude about is an effective premise for a poem because it has immediate tonal "torque."

As an illustration, consider "Thank You" by the poet John Skoyles, in which the speaker offers somewhat ironic thanks to an ex-girlfriend:

Thank you for leaving me
talking to myself in your voice,
and thank you for everything I said
about your needing me.

And for my invention of so many pet names,
thank you. They could have been heard
only by someone in love, in bed.

And thank you for making me so aware
of the pain of something said,
and the pain of something not said.

And for stopping me from thinking
what might have been, thanks,
because when you think like that

you're already in the past tense
and someone's got to bring you out of it,
thank you.

Following Skoyles's example, write a poem in which the speaker expresses gratitude for some misfortune or mistreatment at the hands of the universe: "Thank You for Taking My Parking Space," "Thank you for Stealing My Computer, Thief," etc.

Exercise 4: Speech Registers

The reverse experiment has equal poetic potential: not an insincere *thank you* but an insincere *I'm sorry*. To apologize for eating the last of the dessert in the refrigerator (when you are not at all sorry), or to apologize for missing an event that you didn't want to attend, has the charming ring of ironic truth. Such a tonal stance is strong because it frames a well-known social reality: the discrepancy between what good manners require and our real feelings. That is solid ground for poetry to stand on. James Laughlin's "It Does Me Good," whose title serves as the first line of the poem, performs this kind of tonal double entendre, creating complexity by seeming to praise the practice of self-humiliation:

to bow my body to the ground
when the emperor passes I am

one of the gardeners at the
palace but I have never seen

his face when he walks in the
garden he is preceded by boys

who ring little bells and I
bow myself down when I hear

the bells. . . .

Laughlin's use of situational tone makes his apparently simple poem provocative as well as charming. The servant says, "It does me good," but, we wonder, is he really grateful for his obligation to prostrate himself? We can't really tell, but the possibility that he is speaking with some hint of irony is provocative. Poems can be ambiguous, entertaining, and surprisingly true all at the same time. Here, your exercise is to take the strategy of one of these poems and write a poem that creates a flavorful contradiction between the speech register and the occasion. Write an apology-you-don't-mean poem.