REGISTER SHIFTS AND INSTITUTIONAL TALK IN A RURAL COMMUNITY: A REGISTER AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF SHIRLEY JACKSON'S "*THE LOTTERY*"

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Abstract
This qualitative document-based study examines how language register shifts and institutional talk work together to produce authority, compliance, and moral order in Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery." Using a systemic functional linguistics (SFL) view of register (field, tenor, mode), supported by conversation-analytic ideas about institutional interaction and a pragmatics view of ritual language, the analysis tracks how villagers move from everyday neighbour talk to procedural, official talk and finally to sanctioning talk that enables collective violence. The findings show three broad phases: (1) informal village interaction dominated by casual evaluations and community small talk; (2) institutionalized procedure marked by role-terms, directives, list-making, and routinized sequencing; and (3) a tightening register where imperative-like moves, reduced mitigation, and group alignment accelerate action. Across phases, the story portrays how institutional roles and ritual routines narrow speaker options, suppress contestation, and reframe violence as "just the way things are done." The study contributes an applied-linguistic account of how register dynamics can be modelled in literary discourse, and how institutional talk may emerge inside small communities without formal buildings or professional officials.
Keywords: *register; institutional talk; systemic functional linguistics; ritual; discourse analysis*

1. Introduction

The language is dependent on the situation. When talking to neighbors, speakers use different linguistic repertoire compared to the one they use when talking about rules, taking attendance, or engaging in other official activities. This contextually-conditioned situational variation is theorized within the context of applied linguistics in the form of register: language variability based on situational uses and communicative functions (Biber and Conrad, 2019; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014). Register not only includes style but is also a practical tool to perform social actions, i.e. requesting, telling, joking, evaluating, in identifiable activities, and it can change with the development of interactional circumstances (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014; O'Donnell, 2021).

One area of interest in which register differences can easily be seen is the institutional talk. Institutional talk is defined as the interaction, which is organized around institutional objectives, where actors are oriented to roles, rights, and conventions of a procedure that define what is and is not relevant to the discourse and how things are performed (Kasper and Wagner, 2014). Task-oriented sequencing, role taking, and turn-taking and action restrictions are the characteristics of interaction inside of institutions that can be studied through conversation analytic approaches and principles (Kasper & Wagner, 2014; Robinson, Clift, Kendrick, and Raymond, 2024). Although a community seems less formal on its face, institutional talk is likely to arise whenever an event is approached as a rule-regulated and consequential event, and ordinary participants are temporarily assigned an official position in an organised process (Kasper and Wagner, 2014).

Ritual practice helps in the transition between institutional talk and everyday talk. It is common to have rituals that combine repetition, standardized language and group involvement to maintain common moral order and to make certain acts socially binding (Kádár, 2017). Ritual sequences are perceived as a way of doing things therefore can narrow the chances of questioning and can turn obedience into a command and not a choice (Kádár, 2017). Newer research also stresses that ritual language is not simply limited to official rites, and it encompasses wider types of group-focused language practice that reinforce group norms and judgments (Kádár, 2024).

Literary texts can serve as a valuable analytical space through which one can study the register and the interaction within the context of institutions, since more often than not, they dramatize the linguistic structuring of social life. Inasmuch as fiction fails to reflect spontaneous speech, it is none the less able to represent recognizable interactional forms, role relations and linguistic routines in an analytically significant manner. Within the pragmatics, researchers believe that fictional texts are complicated communicative artefacts, which could be examined in order to explain pragmatic impacts, interactional meanings, and the influence of discourse in the formation of social relations (Locher, Jucker, Landert, and Messerli 2023). This viewpoint promotes the study of fictional dialogue and narration as organized forms of interaction in scenarios when the text prefigures speech acts and focuses on the utilization of talk to drive the narrative forward (Locher et al., 2023).

The first publication of The Lottery by Shirley Jackson in The New Yorker (June 26, 1948) is an archetypal example of a village ritual which is depicted as a normal community life (Jackson, 1948). The story follows a small village where a lottery is held annually by the publicly conducted procedure, in which villagers become a temporary institution/organizers and rule keepers. Therefore, the story is a useful resource in exploring how ordinary village talk may change into an institutional talk and how these changes can be used to normalise a dangerous mass behavior. The current paper thus explores the alterations in registers at various critical stages of the story and justifies the manner in which these alterations strengthen institutional power and societal obedience.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Although there has been much research on *The Lottery*, there is still a relative lack of research in the applied linguistics that presents a coherent model of register shifts and institutional discourse throughout the sequence of events in the narrative. Current linguistic studies are usually focused on single phenomena, such as transitivity patterns applied to a single character, or general ideological interpretation through critical discourse analysis and appraisal research. Although these methodological strategies are invaluable as they help us understand how language works at each specific stage, it is quite common that they do not explain how language evolves through a sequential process through informal village communication to formal institutional process and finally, collective sanctioning. This gives rise to a requirement of a more detailed, sequence sensitive description that determines (a) the registers which have been involved to triggering each of these phases, (b) the linguistic indicators of these changes, and (c) how these changes enable the implementation of institutional authority and obedience in a small community context.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To identify the main registers represented in the story and describe them using SFL field–tenor–mode.
2. To examine the linguistic features that signal shifts from everyday village talk to institutional and sanctioning talk.
3. To explain how register shifts and institutional talk contribute to authority, compliance, and the maintenance of moral order in the village ritual.

1.3 Research Questions

1: What registers are represented across key phases of "The Lottery," and how can they be described in terms of field, tenor, and mode?
2: What linguistic features mark movement from everyday village interaction to institutional procedure and then to sanctioning action?
3: How do register shifts and institutional talk construct authority and encourage compliance during the village ritual?

1.4 Significance of the Study

The research is important to applied linguistics since it applies register theory, institutional talk, and ritual pragmatics to one line of analytical work. It shows that non-professional interaction, even in a local society, can be institutionalized, and explains how the process of register shift is able to gradually limit dissent and encourage alignment in times of high stakes. The paper provides a good example of how a close and sequence-based discourse analysis may be directed towards a literary text in order to generate explicit analytic categories and transferable insights to sociolinguistic and discourse-analytic investigation and inform studies of community rituals, local governance, and institutional communication in everyday settings

2. Literature Review

Using conversation analysis (CA), the applied linguistics field has understood the manner in which institutional goals guide interaction. Classroom interaction is shaped by institutional roles and pedagogical structures that influence who speaks, how participation occurs, and how authority is distributed (Seedhouse, 2004; Walsh, 2011). Similar interactional dynamics have also been observed in ESL classrooms in Pakistan where classroom discourse is influenced by pedagogical practices and sociocultural norms (Abdullah et al., 2026).I nitial implemented CA studies indicate that the institutional context commonly re-structures turn-taking, limits the standards of a reasonable next act, and distributes rights and responsibilities unequally among parties. Sert and Seedhouse (2011) are an illustration of the application of institutional goals and role relations in the organisation of the classroom interaction, whereas subsequent syntheses, including Kasper and Wagner (2014), describe how CA is applied to the enhancement of applied linguistics through the alignment of the micro-level practises with the institutional contexts. In this context, institutional talk is not defined by the material preconditions or professional statuses; it is defined by the tendency of the participants to the institutional work, processes, and functions.

Neighbouring line of research emphasises that the interaction of institutions is often based on the asymmetry of epistemological and deontological forms of interaction, i.e., distribution of knowledge rights and decision rights. The fact that speakers can control knowledge claims and entitlements by structuring their language (Heritage, 2012) indicates that epistemics is a topic investigated in conversation. This theoretical observation is applicable to village rituals, in which certain speakers can claim procedural knowledge (how it is done) and gain temporary power, despite the egalitarian status of the speakers in the community.

In line with CA, register research in the context of corpus linguistics provides empirical data regarding that systematic language variation is characterisable and quantifiable in different contexts. In multilingual educational contexts, language use is also shaped by institutional policies such as English-medium instruction (EMI), which influence participation patterns, comprehension, and academic interaction (Abdullah et al., 2025). Egbert, Biber, and Davies (2015) propose a bottom-up strategy of classifying web registers based on the purpose and language characteristics of users, whereas Biber and Egbert (2016) unveil multidimensional tendencies of register variation in searchable web corpora. Despite the fact that these inquiries focus on online texts, they support a relevant argument regarding the current research: registers

are identifiable groups of characteristics that are linked to repetitive circumstances and communicative intentions.

In the systemic functional linguistics (SFL), register is traditionally defined based on the situational context, which includes a domain of activity (field), people and their relationships (tenor), and the channel and rhetorical organisation of linguistic means (mode). The modern register scholarship has now outgrown the description of register as a fixed phenomenon in equilibrium by dynamic and multidimensional models of explanatory co-evolution of context and language. Moore (2020) defines new trends and contradictions in the process of conceptualising register as semantic configuration, arguing that register models should be sensitive to meaning-making on the strata. O'Donnell (2021) proposes a similar re-definition of field, tenor, and mode in the form of dynamic contextual modelling, highlighting that context is not an inert background but a moving object that can change throughout the ongoing discourse.

Ritual language has also received a new interest in the sphere of pragmatics and interactional sociolinguistics. Kádár (2017) relates rituals to maintenance of moral order and shows how the conventionalised interaction allows the sanctioning and assessment of the participants. The more recent synthesis by Kádár (2024) broadens the conceptualisation of ritual to cover a range of communally directed language practises, such as the everyday forms of politeness, swearing, and humour, and provides methodological means of studying ritual as an interactional work, not as a tradition. These views explain why the participants can perceive ritual sequences as mandatory and why deviance can be perceived as dissent.

The analysis of literary discourse using linguistic methodological approaches has steadily evolved beyond the stylistic description into the pragmatic and interactional domains. Locher, Jucker, Landert, and Messerli (2023) evaluate how pragmatics is applied to fiction and argue that the interactional norms, speech acts, and relational dynamics can be encoded in interactionally salient ways in fictional narratives, despite that the mediation of authorship. This enhances the usefulness of The Lottery as a textual location of the study of the representation and interpretation of institutional and ritual talk.

In research in the field of scholarship on The Lottery, linguistic studies are often focused on specific grammatical or evaluative frameworks. Nugraha and Mahdi (2020) use SFL transitivity to examine the roles of the clauses related to Mr. Summers to render him a central character in the storey. Combining the critical discourse analysis of Fairclough with the appraisal theory, Paramitha (2021) presents his argument that the narrative has been providing the social domination and marginalisation through the conventional means. More recent texts also place the storey in a broader socio-historical context; an example is Robinson (2019) who situates the narrative within Holocaust-related discourses about scapegoating and selection to demonstrate how banal procedure has the power to make extreme violence normal.

Notwithstanding these contributions, there remains a gap in the literature to an analysis that is register-based and sequence-sensitive; to one that follows the linguistic changes that take place through the ritual phases, the way institutional roles are embodied by the design of interactions

and the reason why these changes give rise to compliance. Recent interdisciplinary literature also underlines the fact that register should be studied in terms of modalities and communities by means of complementary methodologies (Pescuma et al., 2022), which in turn supports the current study in its attempt to combine register description with discourse-analytic interpretation.

Together, these analyses suggest that (a) institutional talk is actualized by means of interactional practices and role orientations, (b) register provides a sound frameworks of elaborating patterned linguistic decisions in different context, and (c) ritual has the capacity of stabilizing the moral order by means of conventionalized sequences. However, the analysis of register shifts as an institutional talk in The Lottery is still not sufficiently discussed.

2.1 Research Gap
The major gap that was investigated in this research is the lack of a cohesive, applied-linguistic explanation explaining how register shifts occur throughout the lottery event and how such shifts result in the development of institutional authority and common compliance. Most of the past linguistic research is usually focused on either clause level systems (e.g., transitivity) or macro-ideological systems (e.g., CDA) and, as such, has devoted little attention to the phase-by-phase interactional organization or the register change that serves as the vehicle between routine procedure and moral action.

2.2 Theoretical Framework
The research takes a tripartite framework. To begin with, the SFL register theory provides the main descriptive tool, which organizes the analysis according to field, tenor, and mode. Second, CA informed ideas of institutional interaction bring the attention to role orientation, procedural dynamics, turn design, and sequential production of compliance. Third, the pragmatics of rituals enables us to explain the way that the conventionalized language and repetitive patterns support the maintenance of moral order and justify sanctioning. Figure 1 shows the interrelationships between these analytic lenses.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework for analysis
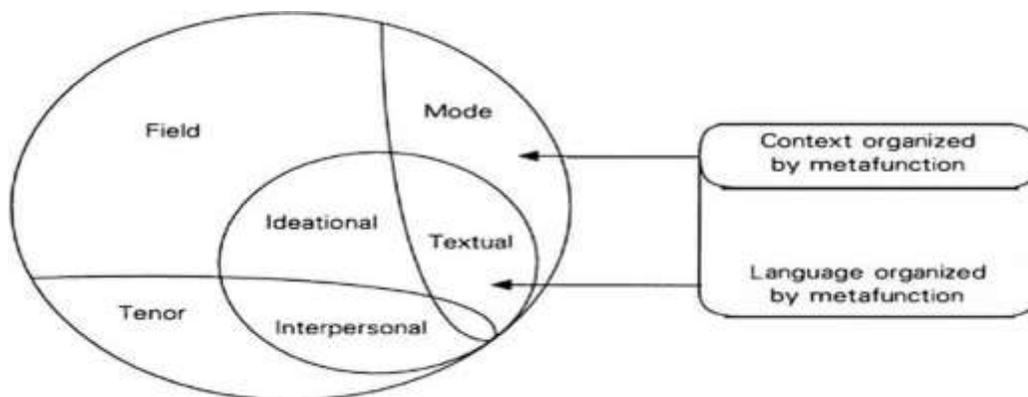
3. Methodology

The approach used in this investigation is a document-based discourse analysis that is qualitative. The main textual data include the short story of Shirley Jackson titled *The Lottery*. Since it is the goal of the research to analyses the representation of a communal event in terms of linguistics, the story is placed as a closed case that can be studied thoroughly.

The discourse segment is the basic unit of study, which is conceptualized as a stage of the event and is represented via the scrutiny of clauses and moves. Segments were marked by changes in the type of activity and structure of participation e.g. the informal convivial discourse and formal procedural talk. Field, tenor, and mode were determined in each segment and linguistic elements relevant to register (labels of roles, modality, directives, pronouns and evaluative expressions) were noted systematically.

The analysis process involved 4 consecutive stages. To mark out the major stages of the lottery, the narration was first read out various times. Each of the phases was then coded to field-tenor-mode alignment and recurrent linguistic markers. The third phase involved the in-depth examination of the chosen passages to demonstrate the way in which the actions of an institution, like announcement, enumeration, direction, and correction, are realised in the form of language. The last stage was comparative analysis through phases in order to explain how register moves are the foundation to authority and compliance.

In order to strengthen the study with credibility, an audit trail was documented by coded annotations of every phase and excerpt. Negative case analysis was also involved through deliberately searching cases that may contradict emerging trends, including linguistic hesitation or discord. In addition, theory triangulation was used by analysing the same passages in terms of the register theory, institutional talk, and rituals. Since the study involves only a publicly available text and no human subjects were involved, the risk to ethics in this case should be of minimal concern; however, to avoid violating anonymity and humility, rather long quotes were replaced with brief extracts.

3.1 Analytic Matrix

Table 1 presents the phase-based matrix used to organize the analysis. The phases are interpretive categories based on activity shifts in the story.

Phase	Field (activity focus)	Tenor (roles/relations)	Mode (channel/organization)
Phase 1: Gathering	Everyday village talk; waiting; small talk	Neighbours; low distance; peer relations	Face-to-face; informal; evaluative
Phase 2: Procedure	Official conduct of lottery; list-making; drawing	Temporary officials vs participants; role asymmetry	Public announcements; procedural sequencing
Phase 3: Sanctioning	Collective action toward the selected person	Group vs individual; high pressure; moral policing	Compressed turns; imperative-like moves; action-focused

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Phase 1: Informal Village Register (Gathering and Waiting)

In the beginning of the story the village is described with the help of the register which can be defined as quotidian interactions. Routine community life, children, households, and casual observations dominate the field, although the tenor is largely symmetrical, as are people who interact as neighbors, who share some common history, and do not have a sense of institutional entitlement. Communication mode is face to face and loosely structured. Register Linguistically, the register is characterized by general lexical persons and places, light evaluative forms, and informal changes of topic.

"The lottery was conducted—as were the square dances ...—by Mr. Summers."

Even when the narrator introduces Mr. Summers, the wording links the lottery to everyday community programs. This framing blends the event into ordinary civic routine, so the institutional nature of the lottery is softened at the beginning. The sentence also introduces a role label ("conducted") that foreshadows procedural authority even before it becomes dominant. The lottery is related to everyday community programmers even when the narrator includes Mr. Summers in the story. This framing synthesizes the event in everyday civic life, which has made the institutional nature of the lottery in the beginning of the narrative weaker. Simultaneously, the act of conducting is also a verb that adds a role name that prefigures authority of procedure prior to its dominance.

4.2 Phase 2: Procedural-Institutional Register (Opening and Drawing)

With the beginning of the lottery, the register changes to a procedural institutional mode. It is made rule-governed in the field: names are sorted, slips are made ready and the order of operations becomes of the essence. Tenor changes to an unequal position where Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves are officials, and members treat them like procedural authorities. Mode takes a more visible and progressive tone: the crowd is driven by announcements and step-by-step sequence. During this stage, language portrays list-making, corrections, and instructions, which characterize institutional language..

"There were the lists to make up—of heads of families ... members of each household."

This extract is the premonition of bureaucratic organization (the concept of lists) and classifying (family, household, member). This kind of language and list is characteristic features of institutional activity since individuals are procedural entries and not simply neighbors

"Daughters draw with their husbands' families, Tessie."

Such corrections testify to the fact that these procedures are supported by the knowledge of rules. The use of a term of direct address (Tessie) and a statement of a rule makes deontic force without using explicit modal verbs like must. The speaker is placed in a position of adjudicator of the rules and the addressee in an accountable role to the rules.

4.3 Phase 3: Sanctioning Register (Collective Action and Moral Pressure)

After the choice, the register gets even tighter whereby the discourse of sanctioning is initiated. The field is re-conceptualized as an immediate collective action. The tenor changes to an official-versus-participant pattern to a group-versus-individual pattern where pressure is more on the chosen person and where there is minimized room to negotiate. Mode is condensed and action-driven, consisting of less mitigations and more alignment. The story of conversion to enforcers of ritual in this phase is portrayed

"The children had stones already, and someone gave little Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles."

The sentence is short, real and action oriented; but the emphasis is not on deliberation but preparation. The involvement is normalized and naturalized through the use of pebbles in the hands of a child, thus creating one of the most important ritual effects: it socializes obedience and spreads the responsibility throughout the community.

"It isn't fair, it isn't right," Mrs. Hutchinson screamed ...

The protest is also framed as a moral claim but this comes too late when the procedural outcome has been created and the group has already mobilized. The protest is in conflict with the register of domination, which takes the sequence as closed and actions as urgent. The irrelevance explains the futility of the protest: the institutional-ritual current has narrowed what can be deemed as an acceptable follow-up to the action.

4.4 Cross-Phase Pattern: How Register Shifts Build Authority and Compliance

In its development, power occurs through gradual register shift as opposed to blatant coercion at the beginning. The lottery is presented as a village routine in Phase 1, which minimises the threat. Phase 2 institutional discourse is characterised by the appearance of lists, rules and corrections; the subjects are turned towards authorities as experts of the procedures. In Phase 3, the institution becomes more than an action and turns into a moralised action of the institution. Register gets tighter, mitigation measures are reduced and the group gathers momentum into the next step at high speed. This trend shows how institutional discourse can be locally created and how ritual sequencing can make routine procedure a moral duty.

These results are in harmony with the dynamic explanations of register and context: field, tenor, and mode shift throughout the activity, and such changes redefine what can be reasonably done by speakers next (O'Donnell, 2021; Moore, 2020). They are also consistent with ritual pragmatics which connects traditional sequences with the moral order (Kádár, 2017, 2024). Notably, according to the storey, the kind of institutional talk may be developed in village life by the temporary character of role-taking and by collective procedures, and not only by formal institutions.

5. Conclusion

This paper has analyzed Shirley Jackson's, *The Lottery*, to explain the role of register shifts and institutional discourse in a village ritual. Using the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) model of field tenor mode interactional and ritual analytic, the study has recognized three phases: an informal community register, a procedural institutional register as well as a sanction oriented register. The analysis shows that there has been a gradual evolution of language of the villagers whereby they were used to everyday communal communication but this has changed to a formal procedural language and finally settling on collective enforcement. This movement serves to normalize harm by placing the occurrence in a context that seems routine, rule-governed and morally binding.

The key contribution of the research is a sequence-based approach to change of the register, which clearly connects linguistic traits with the formation of the authority and compliance in a small community context. In addition, the study demonstrates the usefulness of literary discourse as a place of analysis in applied linguistics, especially in the study of the language of interaction that is represented, role relations, and the language of ritual.

The limitations of the study are based on the fact that it is dependent on one piece of literature, and thus, the results of the study are interpretative, as opposed to being statistically generalizable. The framework might be expanded in the future by including verbal data supplied by real village institutions (e.g. local councils, dispute-mediation forums, community announcements) or by comparing more than one text representing rural institutional practises. Register scholars could also combine register analysis with corpus-stylistic methods in order to measure groups of features in larger bodies of narratives

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