"Thanks very much President…" or "Thank you Mr President…" Investigating formality in mediated and non-mediated discourse

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As pointed out by Heylighen and Dewaele (1999), all speakers are likely to intuitively distinguish between formal and informal register, whereby the prototypical formal end of the spectrum resembling the language used by a judge during a trial could be contrasted with the prototypical very informal end marked by a relaxed conversation among friends. Graesser et al. (2014: 2018) associate formality with the need to be "precise, coherent, articulate, and convincing to an educated audience", as opposed to informal settings such as oral conversation, which is "narrative, replete with embodiment words" and reliant on common background knowledge. Andren et al. (2010:224) link formality with the application of "officially standardized and recognized institutional conventions or prescriptions".

Translators also treat conventions in a very special way. Baker (1993) lists conventionalisation as one of the potential translation universals. Indeed, it has been suggested that translations use "generally unmarked grammar clichés, and typical, common lexis instead of the unusual or the unique" (Mauranen 2008:41). It is possible that the conscious choice of more formal conventional linguistic forms may allow potentially risk-averse (Pym 2005) translators to transfer the source meaning in a "precise, coherent, articulate, and convincing" way. For the same reasons, other forms of constrained language production (Lanstyák and Heltai 2012) are hypothetically likely to be characteristic of a higher level of formality.

In this paper we report on a quantitative and qualitative analysis of formality of native and mediated speeches delivered at the European Parliament and compiled in the European Translation and Interpreting Corpus (Ferraresi – Bernardini 2019). As formality is a relational concept (Heylighen 1999), in the reported study we compare the examined language varieties to one another. Our working hypothesis is that written mediated varieties are located at the far end of the formality spectrum from spoken native varieties. We also hypothesise that mediation has an equalizing effect, causing the mediated written and spoken varieties to be closer to each other on the formality spectrum than the native non-mediated written and spoken varieties. In the study we rely on the formality indicators identified by Ivaska et al. (in preparation) in a data-driven but human-informed operationalization of linguistic formality in EPTIC.

(words: 356)

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